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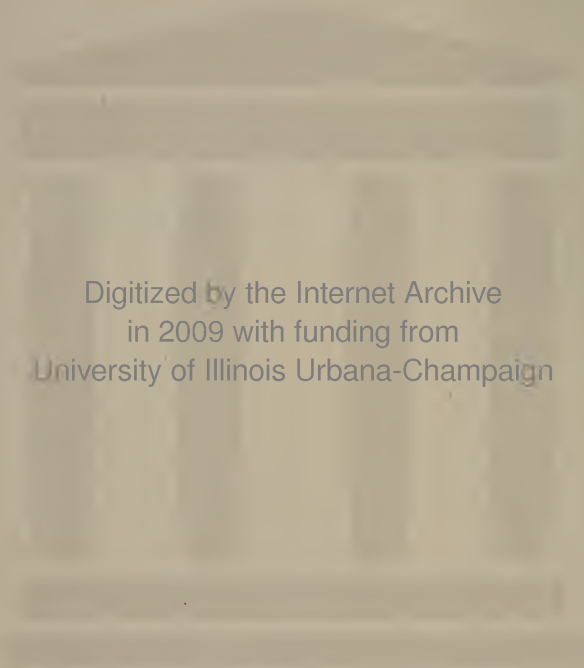
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A POOR GENTLEMAN.

VOL. III.



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A POOR GENTLEMAN

BY

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‘IT WAS A LOVER AND HIS LASS,’ ‘THE LAIRD OF NORLAW,’
‘AGNES,’ ‘ADAM GRAEME OF MOSSGRAY,’ ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

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A POOR GENTLEMAN.

CHAPTER I.

A DOMESTIC EXPLOSION.

THE breakfast-table at the Hook was not a particularly quiet scene. The children were all in high spirits in the freshness of the morning, and the toys and Christmas presents, though not very fine or expensive, had still novelty to recommend them. Little Molly, before she was lifted up to her high chair, working away conscientiously and gravely with a large rattle, held at the length of her little arm, while her next little brother drew over the carpet a cart fitted up with some kind of mechanism which

called itself music, and Horry flogged his big wooden horse, and little Dick added a boom upon his drum, made a combination of noises which might well have shut out all external sounds. This tumult, indeed, calmed when father came in, when the ringleaders were lifted up on their chairs, and another kind of commotion, the sound of spoons and babble of little voices, began. What other noise could be heard through it?

Mab did not think she could have heard anything, scarcely the approach of an army. But the ears of the family were used to it, and had large capabilities. When Martha came in with a fresh supply of milk and a countenance more ruddy than usual, her mistress put the question directly which so embarrassed the young woman.

‘Martha, was that your father’s voice I heard? Is there anything wrong at home?’

‘No, ma’am—my lady,’ said Martha, in her confusion stumbling over the new title which she was in fact more particular about than its possessor.

‘What does he want, then, so early in the morning? I hope your mother is not ill.’

‘Oh, no, my lady.’

Martha grew redder and redder, and lingered like a messenger who does not know how to deliver a disagreeable commission, turning her tray round and round in her hands.

‘It is me, no doubt, that Crockford wants. If it’s nothing very particular, he can come here.’

‘Oh, no, sir; oh, please, Sir Edward, no, it ain’t you——’

‘Then who is it, Martha? some one here it must be.’

‘Please, Sir Edward—please, my lady—I don’t think as it’s no one here at all; it’s only a fancy as he’s took in his head. Oh,’ cried the girl, her eyes moist with excitement, her plump cheeks crimson, ‘don’t listen to him, don’t give any heed to him! it’s all just fancy what he says.’

‘Why, what’s the matter, Martha? has John Baker got into trouble? Edward, go and see what is wrong,’ said Lady Penton, placidly.

She was very kind, but, after all, Molly's bread-and-milk, and the egg which was ordered for little Jack because he was delicate, were of more immediate importance than Martha's love-affairs. Sir Edward was perhaps even more amiable in this respect than his wife. Old Crockford was a favourite in his way, and had often amused a weary afternoon when the horizon at the Hook was very limited and very dull. And now even Mab could hear, through the chatter of the children, the sound of some one talking, loud but indistinct, outside. At that moment, with the usual cruelty of fate, a pause took place in the domestic murmur, and suddenly Walter's voice became audible, crying, 'Hush! Don't speak so loud.'

The door had been left ajar by Martha, and these words, so unexpected, so incomprehensible, fell into the simple warm interior, unconscious of evil, like a stone into the water.

'Go and see what it is, Edward,' Lady Penton repeated, growing a little pale.

The family to which for so long a time nothing had happened had got to a crisis, when anything

might happen, and new events were the order of the day.

Sir Edward, who had been going with great composure, hurried his steps a little, and, what was more, closed the door behind him ; but it cannot be said that he anticipated anything disagreeable. When he got out into the hall, however, he was startled by the sight of Walter, who was pushing Crockford into the book-room, and repeating, in a half-whisper,

‘Hush, I tell you. Be quiet. What good can it do you to let everybody know?’

‘It’s right, Mr. Walter, as your father should know.’

‘Not if I satisfy you,’ said the boy. ‘Come in here. They are all at breakfast. Quick. Whatever it is, I am the person——’

Walter’s voice broke off short, and his under lip dropped with a shock of sudden horror. His father’s hand, preventing the closing of it, was laid upon the book-room door.

‘If it is anything that concerns you, Wat, it must concern me too,’ Sir Edward said.

He did not even now think any more of Walter’s

possibilities of ill-doing than of Horry's. They were still on about the same level to the father's 'eyes. He supposed it was some innocent piece of mischief, some practical joke, or at the worst some piece of boyish negligence, of which Crockford had come to complain. He followed the two into the room with the suspicion of a smile at the corners of his mouth. He did not quite understand of what mischief his son might have been guilty, but there could be nothing very serious in the matter when old Crockford was the complainant.

‘Well,’ he said, ‘old friend, what has my boy done?’

But the sight of Sir Edward and this smiling accost seemed to take the power of speech from Crockford as well as from Walter. The old man opened his mouth and his eyes: the colour faded as far as that was possible out of the streaky and broken red of his cheeks. He began to hook his fingers together, changing them from one twist to another as he turned his face from the father to the son. It was evident

that, notwithstanding his half-threat to Walter, the presence of Walter's father was as bewildering to him as to the young man.

‘Well, sir,’ he said, instinctively putting up his hand to his head and disordering the scanty white locks which were drawn over his bald crown, ‘I’m one as is for lookin’ ahead, so being as I’m an old man, and has a deal of time to think; my occypation’s in the open air, and things go through my head that mightn’t go through of another man’s.’

‘That is all very well,’ said Sir Edward, still with his half-smile. ‘I have heard you say as much a great many times, Crockford, but it generally was followed by something less abstract. What has your occupation and your habit of thought to say to my boy?’

Upon this Crockford scratched his head more and more.

‘I was observin’ to Mr. Walter, sir, as a young gentleman don’t think of them things, but as how it’s a good thing to take care: for you never knows what way trouble’s a-going to come. The storm may be in the big black cloud as covers

the whole sky, or it may be in one that's no bigger nor a man's hand.'

'Yes, yes, yes,' said Sir Edward, impatiently; 'I tell you I've heard you say that sort of thing a hundred times. Come to the point. What is there between Walter and you?'

'There's nothing, father—nothing whatever. I haven't seen Crockford for ages, except on the road. He has done nothing to me nor I to him.'

'Then you'd better be off to your breakfast, and leave him to me,' said the father, calmly.

His mind was as composed as his looks. He felt no alarm about his son, but with a little amusement cast about in his mind how he was to draw out of the old road-mender the probably very small and unimportant thread of complaint or remonstrance that was in him. But Walter showed no inclination to budge. He did not, it would appear, care for breakfast. He stood with his head cast down, but his eye upon Crockford, not losing a single movement he made. Sir Edward began to feel a faint misgiving, and old Crockford took his coloured

handkerchief out of his breast and began to mop his forehead with it. It was a cold morning, not the kind of season to affect a man so. What did it all mean?

‘Look here,’ said Sir Edward, ‘this can’t go on all day. Crockford, you have some sense on ordinary occasions. Don’t think to put me off with clouds and storms, etc., which you know have not the least effect upon me; but tell me straight off, what has Walter to do with it? and what do you mean?’

‘Father,’ said Walter, ‘it’s something about a lodger he has. There is a—young lady living there. I’ve seen her two or three times. She has spoken to me even, thinking, I suppose, that I was a gentleman who would not take any advantage. But the old man doesn’t think so; he thinks I’m likely to do something dishonourable—to be a cad, or—I don’t know what. You know whether I’m likely to be anything of the sort. If you have any confidence in me you will send him away——’

‘A young lady!’ Sir Edward exclaimed, with amazement.

‘And that’s not just the whole of it, sir, as Mr. Walter tells you,’ said Crockford, put on his mettle. ‘I’m not one as calls a young gentleman names; cad and such-like isn’t words as come nat’ral to the likes of me. But, as for being a lady, there ain’t no ladies live in cottages like mine. I don’t go against ladies—nor lasses neither, when they’re good uns.’

‘What does all this mean? I think you are going out of your senses, Wat—both Crockford and you. Have you been rude to anyone?—do you think he has been rude to anyone? Hold your tongue, Wat! Come, my man, speak out. I must know what this means.’

‘It means that he is trying to make mischief——’

‘It means, sir,’ said Crockford, in his slow, rural way, taking the words out of Walter’s mouth—‘I beg your pardon, Sir Edward. I don’t know as I’m giving you the respect as is your due, though there’s none—I’m bold to say it, be the other who he may—as feels more respect. It means just this, Sir Edward,’ he went on, advertised by an impatient nod that

he must not lose more time, 'as there's mischief done, or will be, if you don't look into it, between this young gentleman—as is a gentleman born, sir, and your heir—and a little—a—a——' (Walter's fiery eye, and a certain threatening of his attitude, as if he might spring upon the accuser, changed Crockford's phraseology, even when the words were in his mouth) 'a young person,' he said, more quickly, 'as is not his equal, and never can be: as belongs to me, sir, and is no more a lady nor—nor my Martha, nor half as good a girl.'

Surprise made Sir Edward slow of understanding—surprise and an absence of all alarm, for to his thinking Walter was a boy, and this talk of ladies, or young persons, was unintelligible in such a connection. He said,

'There is surely some strange mistake here. Walter's—why, Walter is—too young for any nonsense of this kind. You're—why, you must be—dreaming, Crockford! You might as well tell me that Horry——'

Here Sir Edward's eyes turned, quite involuntarily, unintentionally upon Walter, stand-

ing up by the mantel-piece with his hands in his pockets, his face burning with a dull heat, his eyes cast down, yet watching under the eyelids every action of both his companions—a nameless air about him that spoke of guilt. He stopped short at the sight; everything in Walter's aspect breathed guilt—the furtive watch he kept, the dull red of anger and shame burning like a fire in his face: the attitude, his hands in his pockets, clenched as if ready for a blow. The first look made Sir Edward stop bewildered, the second carried to his mind a strange, painful, unpleasant discovery. Walter was no longer a boy! He had parted company from his father, and from all his father knew of him. This perception flashed across his mind like a sudden light. He gasped, and could say no more.

Crockford took advantage of the pause.

‘If I may make so bold, sir,’ he said, ‘it’s you as hasn’t taken note of the passage of time. It ain’t wonderful. One moment your child here’s a boy at your knee, the next his heart’s set on getting married—or wuss. That’s how it goes.

I've had a many children myself, and seen 'em grow up and buried most on 'em. Martha, she's my youngest, she's a good lass. As for the lads, ye can't tell where ye are : one day it's a pegtop and the next it's a woman. If I may make so bold, I've known you man and boy for something like forty years; and I'm sorry for you, Sir Edward, that I am.'

Sir Edward heard as if he heard it not, the *bourdonnement* of this raw rustic voice in his ears, and scarcely knew what it meant. He turned to his son without taking any notice.

'Walter,' he said, with something keen, penetrating, unlike itself in his voice, 'what is this? what is this? I don't seem to understand it.'

He was going to be angry presently, very angry; but in the first place it was necessary that he should know.

'I won't deceive you, father,' said Walter. 'From his point of view I suppose he's right enough—but that is not my point of view.'

'Mr. Walter,' old Crockford said, beginning one of his speeches.

The old man in his patched coat of an

indescribable colour, the colour of the woods and hedgerows, with his red handkerchief in a wisp round his neck, the lock of thin grey hair smoothed over his bald crown, his hat in his old knotted rugged hands, all knuckles and protrusions, came into Sir Edward's mind, as the companion figure leaning on the mantel-piece had done, like a picture all full of meaning; but he stopped the old man's slow discourse with a wave of his hand, and turned to his son, impatiently. He had not voice enough in his bewilderment to say, 'Go on,'—he said it with his hand.

'Well, sir!' said the lad, 'I don't know what I have to say; there are things one man doesn't tell another, even if it's his father. There's nothing in me that is dishonourable, if that is what you mean. If there were, it is *her* eye I should shrink from first of all.'

Her eye! The father stood confounded, not able to believe his ears. He made one more attempt at a question, not with words, but with a half stupefied look, again silencing Crockford with his hand.

‘I tell you, father,’ cried Walter, with irritation, ‘there are things one man doesn’t tell another, not even if——’ He was pleased, poor boy, with that phrase; but the examination, the discovery was intolerable to him. He gave a wave of his hand towards Crockford, as if saying, ‘Question him—hear him—hear the worst of me!’ with a sort of contemptuous indignation: then shot between the two other men like an arrow, and was gone.

‘Things one man doesn’t tell to another, even if it’s his father!’ One man to another! was it laughable, was it tragical? Sir Edward, in the confusion of his soul, could not tell. He looked at Crockford, but not for information; was it for sympathy? though the old stone-breaker was at one extremity of the world and he at the other. He felt himself shaking his head in a sort of intercommunion with old Crockford, and then stopped himself with a kind of angry dismay.

‘If you’ve anything to say on this subject, let me have it at once,’ he said.

‘I can talk more freely, sir, now as he’s gone. That young gentleman is that fiery, and that

deceived. The young uns is like that, Sir Edward ; us as is older should make allowances, though now and again a body forgets. I'm one that makes a deal of allowances myself, being a great thinker, Sir Edward, in my poor way. Well, sir, it's this, sir—and glad I am as you're by yourself and I can speak free. She's nobody no more nor I am. She's a little baggage, that's what she is. How she come to me was this. A brother of mine, as has been no better than what you may call a rollin' stone all his life, and has done a many foolish things, what does he do at last but marry a woman as had been a play-actress, and I don't know what. They say as she was always respectable—I don't know. And she had a daughter, this little baggage as is here, as was her daughter, not his, nor belonging to none o' us. But her mother, she bothered me to 'ave 'er, to take her out of some man's way as wanted to marry her, but his friends wouldn't hear of it. And that's how it is. How she came across Mr. Walter is more than I can tell. That's just how things happens, that is. You or me, Sir Edward,

begging your pardon, sir, it's a thing that don't occur to the likes of us: but when a young gentleman is young and tender-hearted, and don't know the world—— The ways of Providence is past explaining,' Crockford said.

Sir Edward stood with that habitual look in his face of a man injured and aggrieved, and full of a troubled yet mild remonstrance with fate, and listened to all this only half hearing it. He heard enough to understand in a dull sort of way what it was which had happened to his boy, a thing which produced upon him perhaps a heavier effect than it need have done by reason of the vagueness in which it was wrapped, the blurred and misty outline of the facts making it so much more considerable. It was not what Crockford said it was, not the mere discovery that his son had got into a foolish 'entanglement,' as so many have done before him, with some village girl, that produced this effect upon him. It was Walter's words so strangely dislocating the connection between them, cutting the ground from under his feet, changing the very foundations of life: 'things one man

doesn't tell to another'—one man!—to another. He kept saying it over in his mind with a bewilderment that kept growing, a confusion which he could not get right—one man, to another. It was this he was thinking of, and not what Crockford had said, when he went back to the dining-room, where all the children had finished breakfast, and his wife met him with a look so full of surprise.

‘What has kept you, Edward? everything is cold. Have you sent Wat out for anything? Has anything happened?’ she said.

CHAPTER II.

MATERNAL DIPLOMACY.

‘ You had better send the children off to play, and never mind if everything is cold. It’s my own fault ; it’s the fault of circumstances.’

He seated himself at table as he spoke, helping himself to some of the cold bacon, which was not appetising : nor had he much appetite. His face was full of care as he swallowed his cup of tea, keeping an eye uneasily upon the children as they were gradually coaxed and led and pushed away. When the door closed upon the last of them there was still a moment of silence. Sir Edward trifled with his cold bacon, he crumbled his roll, he swallowed his tea in large abstract gulps, but said nothing, his mind

being so full, yet so confused and out of gear. And it was not till his wife repeated her question, this time with a tone of anxiety, that he replied,

‘What is it? It’s something that has taken me all aback, as you see. It’s—something about a woman.’

‘Something about a woman!’ she repeated, with the utmost astonishment; but, had he said ‘something about a cabbage,’ Lady Penton could not have been less alarmed.

‘Living at old Crockford’s,’ he went on. ‘I don’t understand the story. The old man talked and talked, and Walter——’

‘What has Walter to do with it, Edward? He has gone out without any breakfast. Have you sent him to see after anything? Where has he gone?’

‘Gone! is he gone? Why, he’s gone to *her*, I suppose: that’s the amusing thing. He says “there’s things one man doesn’t tell to another;” one man!—that’s how Wat speaks to me, Annie.’ He gave a laugh which was far from joyful. ‘I think the boy’s gone off his head.’

‘Wat says—? I don’t know what you mean, Edward.’

‘Nor more do I; it’s past understanding. It’s the sort of thing people talk of, but I never thought it would come in our way. It’s an entanglement with some girl in the village. Don’t you know what that means?’

‘Edward!’ cried the mother; and a flash of colour like a flame passed over her face. She was confounded, and unable to make any comment even in her thoughts.

‘You can’t take it in, and I don’t wonder; neither can I, that know more of the world than you can do. Our Wat, that has never seemed anything but a schoolboy! Why, Horry will be saying presently, “There are some things that one man doesn’t tell to——” I don’t know what the world is coming to,’ he cried, sharply.

When Sir Edward himself was taken by surprise, he felt by instinct that something sudden and unexpected must have occurred to the world.

Lady Penton was perhaps still more taken by

surprise than her husband. But she did not make any observations against the world. The sudden flush faded from her face as she sat opposite to him, her astonished eyes still fixed upon him, her hands crossed in her lap. But a whole panorama instantly revealed itself before her mind.

How could she have been so blind? Walter had been absent continually, whenever he could get an opportunity of stealing away. The reading in the evening, and a hundred little kindly offices which he had been in the habit of performing for his sisters, and with them, had all dropped, as she suddenly perceived. For weeks past he had been with them very little, taking little interest in the small family events, abstracted and dreamy, wrapped in a world of his own. She saw it all now as by a sudden flash of enlightenment. ‘Some things a man doesn’t tell to another man’—oh no, not even to another woman, not to his mother! How strange, bewildering, full of confusion, and yet somehow how natural! This was not her husband’s point of view. To him it was

monstrous, a thing that never used to happen, an instance of the decay and degradation of the world. Lady Penton, though the most innocent of women, did not feel this. To her, with a curious burst of understanding, as if a new world had opened at her feet, it seemed natural, something which she ought to have expected, something that expanded and widened out her own world of consciousness.

Walter, then, her boy, loved somebody. It brought a renewed, fainter flush to her cheek, and a wonderfully tender light to her eyes. She thought of that first, before it occurred to her to think (all being the work of a moment) who it was who had opened this new chapter in her boy's life, and made Walter a man, the equal of his father. Oh, that he should have become the equal of his father, a man, loving, drawing to himself the life of another, he who was only a boy! This wonder, though it might have an acute touch in it, had also a curious sweetness. For Lady Penton was not the hungry jealous mother of one child, but the soft expansive parent of many, and never had

shut herself up in the hope of retaining them altogether for her own.

‘It is very strange,’ she said, after a pause, ‘it takes a good time to accustom one’s self to such an idea’ (which was not the case, for she had done it in the flash of a moment). ‘It would be quite nice—and agreeable,’ she added, with some timidity, ‘if it was a—right person; but did you say, Edward—*what* did you say?’

‘Nice!’ he cried, with an explosion like thunder, or so it seemed to his wife’s ears, a little nervous with all that had happened. ‘You can’t have listened to what I have been saying. I told you plainly enough. A girl that has been living at old Crockford’s, a girl out of the village—no, worse, much worse, sent down from London, to be out of some one’s way——’

Lady Penton had sprung to her feet, and came towards him with her hands clasped, as if praying for mercy.

‘Oh! Edward, no, no, no; don’t say all that, Edward,’ she cried.

‘What am I to say? It’s all true so far as I know. You can ask Martha about her. Perhaps

that's the best way; trust one woman to tell you the worst that's to be said of another. Yes, I think on the whole that's the best way. Have her up and let us hear——'

'What!' said Lady Penton, 'call up Martha, and question her about a thing that Walter's mixed up in? let her know that we are in trouble about our boy? make her talk about—about that sort of thing—before *you*? I don't know what sort of a woman you take me for, Edward. At all events, that is not what you would ever get me to do.'

He stared at her, only partially understanding—perhaps indeed not understanding at all, but feeling an obstacle vaguely shape itself in his path.

'Annie,' he said, 'there's no room for sentiment here: whatever the girl is, she's not a person that should ever have come in Walter's way.'

Upon which his mother without any warning began suddenly to cry, a thing which was still more confusing to her husband: exclaiming by intervals,

‘Oh! my Wat! Oh! my poor boy! What did you say to him? You must have been harsh, Edward; oh, you must have been harsh; and to think he should have rushed out without any breakfast!’

Lady Penton sobbed and cried.

It was not very long, however, before the mistress of the house, returning to the routine of domestic matters and with no trace of tears about her, though there was a new and unaccustomed look of anxiety in her eyes, found Martha in the pantry, where she was cleaning the silver, and lingered to give her a few orders, especially in respect to the plate. Lady Penton pointed out to her that she was using too much plate-powder, that she was not sufficiently careful with the chasings and the raised silver of the edges, with various other important pieces of advice, which Martha took with some curtsies but not much satisfaction. Lady Penton then made several remarks about the crystal which it would be impertinent to quote: and then she smoothed matters by asking Martha how her mother was.

‘I have not seen her for some time ; I suppose she doesn’t go out in this cold weather, which is good for no one,’ said Lady Penton.

‘Oh, my lady, there’s worse things than the bad weather,’ cried Martha.

She was her father’s child, and apt, like him, to moralise.

‘That is very true : but the bad weather is at the bottom of a great deal of rheumatism and bronchitis as well as many other things.’

‘Yes, my lady, but there’s things as you can’t have the doctor to, and them’s the worst of all.’

‘I hope none of your brothers are a trouble to her, Martha ; I thought they were all doing so well?’

‘Oh, it ain’t none of the boys, my lady. It’s one as is nothing to us, not a blood relation at all. Father was telling master—or, at least, he come up a-purpose to tell master, but I begged him not,’ said the young woman, rubbing with redoubled energy. ‘I said, “Father, what’s the good ?”’

‘You are very right there, Martha: Sir

Edward is only annoyed with complaints from the village ; he can't do anything. It is much better in such a case to come to me.'

'Yes, my lady : I didn't want them to trouble you neither. I told 'em her ladyship had a deal to think of. You see, my lady, mother's deaf, and things might go on—oh, they might go on to any length afore she'd hear.'

'I know she is deaf, poor thing,' Lady Penton said.

'That was why I didn't want her to take a lodger at all, my lady. But Emmy's not a lodger, after all. She's a kind of a relation. She's Uncle Sam's wife's daughter, and she didn't look like one as would give trouble. She's just as nice-spoken as anyone could be, and said she was to help mother ; and so she does, and always kind. Whatever father says, she always been kind—and that handy, turning an old gown to look like new, and telling you how things is worn, and all what you can see in the shops, and as good-natured with it all——'

'Of whom are you speaking, Martha ? Emmy,

did you say? Who is Emmy? I have never heard of her before.'

'She's the young woman, my lady; oh! she's the one—she's the young person, she's—it was her as father came to speak of, and wouldn't hold his tongue or listen to me.'

'What is there to say about her? Sir Edward, I am afraid, did not understand. He has a great many things to think of. It would have been much better if your father had come to me. Who is she, and what has she done?'

Lady Penton spoke with a calm and composure that was almost too complete; but Martha was absorbed in her own distress and suspected nothing of this.

'Please, my lady,' she cried, with a curtsey, 'she have done nothing. She's dreadful taking, that's all. When she gets talking, you could just stop there for ever. It's a great waste of time when you've a deal to do, but it ain't no fault of hers. She makes you laugh, and she makes you cry, and, though she don't give herself no airs, she can talk as nice as any of the quality, as if she was every bit a lady—and

the next moment the same as mother or like me.'

'She must be very clever,' said Lady Penton. 'Is she pretty too?'

'I don't know as I should have taken no notice of her looks but for other folks a-talking of them,' said Martha. 'I don't know as I sees her any different from other folks; but, as for good nature and making things pleasant, there ain't none like her high nor low.'

'And what is she doing here? and why did your father come to Sir Edward about her?' said Lady Penton, in her magisterial calm.

'Oh, my lady, you'll not be pleased; I'd rather not tell you. When father does notice a thing he's *that* suspicious! I'd rather not—oh, I'd rather not!'

'This is nonsense, Martha—you had much better tell me. What has this girl been doing that Sir Edward ought to know?'

Martha twisted her fingers together in overwhelming embarrassment.

'Oh, my lady, don't ask me! I could not bear to tell you—and you'd not be pleased.'

‘What have I to do with it, my good girl?’ said Walter’s mother, as steadily as if she had been made of marble; and then she added, ‘But after hearing so much I must know. You had better tell me. I may perhaps be of use to her, poor thing!’

‘Oh, my lady, Sir Edward’ll tell you. Oh, what have I got to do pushing into it! Oh, if you’re that kind, my lady, and not angry!’ Here Martha paused, and took a supreme resolution. ‘It’s all father’s doing, though I say it as shouldn’t. He thinks as Mr. Walter—oh, my lady, Mr. Walter’s like your ladyship—he’s that civil and kind!’

‘I am glad you think so, Martha. Gentlemen are very different from us; they don’t think of things that come into every woman’s mind. I shall be angry indeed if you keep me standing asking questions. What has all this to do with my son?’

‘It’s all father’s ways of thinking. There’s nothing in it—not a thing to talk about. It’s just this—as Mr. Walter has seen Emmy a time or two at the cottage door. And he’s said a

civil word. And Emmy is one as likes to talk to gentlefolks, being more like them in herself than the likes of us. And so—and so—father's taken things into his head—as he did, my lady,' cried Martha, with a blush and a sudden change of tone, 'about John Baker and me.'

'About John Baker and you?'

'Yes, my lady,' cried Martha, very red; 'and there's no more truth in it the one nor the other. Can't a girl say a word but it's brought up against her, like as it was a sin? or give a civil answer but it's said she's keeping company? It ain't neither just nor right. It's as unkind as can be. It's just miserable livin' when there's nought but folks suspecting of you all round.'

'Martha, is that how your father treated John Baker and you? I think you're hard upon your father. He behaved very well about that, and you know you were yourself to blame. This that you tell me is all nonsense, to be sure. I will speak to Mr. Walter.' She paused a little, and then asked, 'This Emmy that you tell me of—is she a nice girl?'

'Oh, yes, my lady.'

‘Is she one that gives a civil answer, as you say, whoever talks to her?’

‘Oh, yes, my lady.’

‘Not particularly to young men?’

‘Oh, no, my lady,’ said Martha, with vehemence, her countenance flaming red, like the afternoon sun.

‘If that is all true,’ said Lady Penton, ‘you may be sure she shall have a friend in me. But I hope it is all true.’

‘As sure as—oh, as sure as the Catechism or the Prayer-book! Oh, my lady, as sure as I’m speaking: and I wouldn’t deceive your ladyship—no, I wouldn’t deceive you, not for nothing in the world!’

‘Except in respect to John Baker,’ said Lady Penton, with a smile; at which Martha burst out crying over the silver that she had been cleaning, and made her plate-powder no better than a puddle of reddish mud.

This led Lady Penton to make a few more observations on the subject with which she had begun the conversation; and then she went away. But, if Martha was left weeping, her

mistress did not carry a light heart out of the pantry, where she had got so much information. The picture of the village siren was not calculated to reassure a mother. She had thought at first that Martha was an enemy, and ready to give the worst version of the story; and then it had turned out that Martha herself was on the side of the girl who had fascinated Walter. Had she fascinated Walter? Was it possible—a girl at a cottage door—a girl who—gave a civil answer?

Lady Penton's imagination rebelled against this description; it rebelled still more at the comparison with John Baker, with whom Martha herself had gone through a troublous episode. Walter Penton like John Baker! She tried to smile, but her lips quivered a little. What was this new thing that had fallen into the peaceful family all in a moment like a bomb full of fire and trouble? She could not get rid of the foolish picture—the girl at the cottage door, smiling on whosoever passed, with her civil answer; and Walter—her Walter, her firstborn, the

heir of Penton—Walter caught by that vulgar snare as he passed by !

Had it been a poor lady, the curate's daughter, the immaculate governess of romance—but the girl whose conversation was so captivating to Martha, who described what things were worn, and all that you could see in the shops—and then, with a smile at the cottage door, caught the unwary boy to whom every girl was a thing to be respected. Martha's little bubble of tears in the pantry were nothing to the few salt drops that came to her mistress's eyes. But Lady Penton went afterwards to the book-room and told her husband that, so far as she could make out, old Crockford must have made a mistake.

‘Martha gives a very good account of the girl,’ she said, ‘and Walter, no doubt, had only talked to her a little, meaning no harm.’

‘He would not have answered me as he did this morning if there had been no harm,’ said Sir Edward, shaking his head.

‘You must have been harsh with him,’ said

his wife. 'You must have looked as if you believed Crockford, and not him.'

'I was not harsh : am I ever harsh ?' cried the injured father.

'Edward, the boy darted out without any breakfast ! How is he to go through the day without any breakfast ? Would he have done that if you had not been harsh to him ?' Lady Penton said.

CHAPTER III.

WAITING.

THE day was a painful one to all concerned : to the father and mother, who knew, though vaguely, all about it, and to the children, who knew only that something was wrong, and that it was Walter who was in fault, a thing incomprehensible, which no one could understand. The girls felt that they themselves might have gone a little astray, that they could acknowledge that as possible ; but Walter ! what could he have done to upset the household, to make the father so angry, the mother so sad ?—to rush out himself upon the world without his breakfast ? That little detail affected their minds perhaps the most of all. The break of

every tradition and habit of life was thus punctuated with a sharpness that permitted no mistake. He had gone out without any breakfast—rushing, driving the gravel in showers from his angry feet.

When the time of the mid-day repast came round there was a painful expectancy in the house. He must return to dinner, they said to themselves. But Walter did not come back for dinner. He was not visible all day. The girls thought they saw him in the distance when they went out disconsolately for a walk in the afternoon, feeling it their duty to Mab. Oh, why was she there, a stranger in the midst of their trouble! They thought they saw him at the top of the steep hill going up from the house to the village. But though they hurried, and Anne ran on in advance, by the time she got to the top he was gone and not a trace of him to be seen. Their hearts were sadly torn between this unaccustomed and awful cloud of anxiety and the duties they owed to their guest. And still more dreadful was it when the Penton carriage came for Mab with a note only, telling

her to do as she pleased, to stay for a few days longer if she pleased.

‘Oh, may I stay?’ she asked, with a confidence in their kindness which was very flattering, but at that moment more embarrassing than words could say.

The two girls exchanged a guilty look, while Lady Penton replied, faltering:

‘My dear! it is very sweet of you to wish it. If it will not be very dull for you——’

‘Oh, dull!’ said Mab, ‘with Ally and Anne, and all the children: and at Penton there is nobody!’

A frank statement of this sort, though it may be selfish, is flattering; indeed, the selfishness which desires your particular society is always flattering. None of them could say a word against it. They could not tell their visitor that she was—oh, so sadly!—in their way, that they could not talk at their ease before her; and that to be compelled to admit her into this new and unlooked-for family trouble was such a thing as made the burden miserable, scarcely to be borne. All this was in their hearts, but

they could not say it. They exchanged a look behind backs, and Lady Penton repeated, with a faint quaver in her voice,

‘My dear! Of course, we shall be only too glad to have you if you think it will not be dull.’

When Mab ran to write her note and announce her intention to remain, the three ladies felt like conspirators standing together in a little circle looking at each other dolefully.

‘Oh, mother, why didn’t you say they must want her at Penton, and that we did not want her here?’

‘Hush, girls! Poor little thing, when she is an orphan, and so fond of you all; though I wish it had been another time,’ Lady Penton said, with a sigh.

They seized her, one by each arm, almost surrounding her, in their close embrace.

‘Mother, what has Wat done? Mother, what is it about Wat?’

‘Oh, hush, hush, my dears!’ And Lady Penton added, disengaging herself with a smile to meet Mab, who came rushing into the room in

great spirits, 'I think as long as the daylight lasts you ought to have your walk.'

It was after this that the girls thought they saw Walter, but could not find any trace of him when they reached the top of the hill.

There had never been any mystery, any anxiety, save in respect to the illnesses that break the routine of life with innocent trouble which anybody may share, in this innocent household. To make excuses for an absent member, and account for his absence as if it were the most natural thing in the world—not to show that you start at every opening of the door; to refrain heroically from that forlorn watch of the window, that listening for every sound which anxiety teaches; to talk and smile even when there are noises, a stir outside, a summons at the door that seems to indicate the wanderer's return—how were they to have that science of trouble all in a moment?

Lady Penton leaped to its very heights at once. She sat there as if all her life she had been going through that discipline, talking to Mab, surveying the children, neglecting nothing,

while all the while her heart was in her ears, and she heard before anyone the faintest movement outside.

They were all very silent at table, Sir Edward making no attempt to disguise the fact that he was out of humour and had nothing to say to anyone, while the girls exchanged piteous looks and kept up an anxious telegraphic communication. But Walter never appeared. Neither to dinner, neither in the evening did he return—the two meals passed without him, his place vacant, staring in their faces, as Anne said. Where was he? What could he be doing? Into what depth of trouble and misery must a boy have fallen who darts out of his father's house without any breakfast, and, as far as can be known, has nothing to eat all day? Where could he go to have any dinner? What could have happened to him?

These words express the entire disorganisation of life, the end of all things in a family point of view, which this dreadful day meant to Walter's sisters, and to his mother in a less degree. Nothing else that could have been

imagined would have reached their hearts in the same way. And the last aggravation was given by the fact that all this which they felt so acutely to imply the deepest reproach against Walter was apparent to little Mab, sitting there with her little smiling face as if there was no trouble in the world. Oh, it was far better, no doubt, that she should suspect nothing, that she should remain in her certainty, so far as Penton Hook was concerned, that there was no trouble in the world! But her face, all tranquil and at ease, her easy flow of talk, her questions, her commentaries, as if life were all so simple and anybody could understand it!

The impatience which sometimes almost overcame all the powers of self-control in Ally and in Anne, cannot be described. They almost hated Mab's pretty blue eyes, and her comfortable, innocent, unsuspecting smile. Had anyone told them that little Mab, that little woman of the world, was very keenly alive to everything that was going on, and had formed her little theory, and believed herself to know quite well what it was all about, the other girls would.

have rejected such an accusation with disdain.

It was quite late, after everything was over, the children all in bed, all the noises of the house hushed and silent, when Walter came home. The family were sitting together in the drawing-room, very dull, as Lady Penton had

rewarned the little guest they would be. She herself had suggested a game of bezique, which she was ready to have played had it been necessary: but Ally and Anne could not for shame let their mother take that rude and arduous task in hand. So this little group of girls had gathered round the table, a pretty contrast in their extreme freshness and youthfulness.

The gravity of this, to her, terrible and unthought-of crisis, the horror of what might be happening, threw a shade upon Ally's passive countenance which suited it. She was very pale, her soft eyes cast down, a faint movement about her mouth. She might have burst out crying over her cards at any moment in the profound tension of her gentle spirit.

Anne was different; the excitement had gone to her head, all her faculties were sharpened;

she had the look of a gambler, keen and eager on her game, though her concentrated attention was not on that at all. She held her head erect, her slender shoulders thrown back, her breath came quickly through her slightly opened lips. Mab was just as usual, with her pretty complexion and her blue eyes, laughing, carrying on a little babble of remark.

‘A royal marriage! Oh, Anne, what luck!’

‘Another card, please—yes, I will have another.’

Her voice was almost the only one that disturbed the silence. Lady Penton in her usual place was a little indistinct in the shade. She had turned her head from the group, and her usually busy hands lay clasped in her lap. She was doing nothing but listening. Sometimes even she closed her eyes, that nothing might be subtracted from her power of hearing. Her husband, still further in the background, could not keep still. Sometimes he would sit down for a moment, then rise again and pace about, or stand before the bookshelves as if looking

for a book ; but he wanted no book—he could not rest.

And then in the midst of the silence of the scene came the sounds that rang into all their hearts. The gate with its familiar jar across the gravel, the click of the latch, then the step, hurried, irregular, making the gravel fly. Lady Penton did not move, nor did Sir Edward, who stood behind her, as if he had been suddenly frozen in the act of walking and could not take another step. Ally's cards fell from her hands and had to be gathered from the floor with a little scuffle and confusion, in the midst of which they were all aware that the hall-door was pushed open, that the step came in and hurried across the hall upstairs and to Walter's room, the door of which closed with a dull echo that ran through all the house. Their hearts stood still ; and then sudden ease diffused itself throughout the place—relief—something that felt like happiness. He had come back ! In a moment more the girls' voices rose into soft laughter and talk. What more was wanted ? Wat had come back. As long as he was at

home, within those protecting walls, what could go wrong?

‘Oh, what a fright we have had,’ said Ally’s eyes, with tears in them, to those of Anne; ‘but now it’s all over! He has come back.’

The parents looked at each other in the half light under the shade of the lamp. When Walter’s door closed upstairs Sir Edward made a step forward as if to follow to his son’s room, but Lady Penton put up her hand to check him.

‘Don’t,’ she said, under her breath.

It still seemed to her that her husband must have been harsh.

‘Some one must speak to him,’ said Sir Edward, in the same tone; ‘this cannot be allowed to go on.’

‘Oh, no, no; go on! oh, no, it can’t go on.’

‘What do you mean, Annie?’ cried her husband, leaning over her chair. ‘Do you think I should take no notice after the dreadful day we have spent, and all on his account?’

‘No, no,’ she said, in a voice which was scarcely audible; ‘no, no.’

‘What am I to do, then—what ought I to do? I don’t want to risk a scene again, but to say “no, no,” means nothing. What do you think I should do?’

She caught his hand in hers as he leaned over her chair, their two heads were close together.

‘Oh, Edward, you’ve always been very good to me,’ she said.

‘What nonsense, Annie! good to you! we’ve not been two, we’ve been one; why do you speak to me so?’

‘Edward,’ she whispered, leaning back her middle-aged head upon his middle-aged shoulder. ‘Oh, Edward, this once let me see him. I know the father is the first. It’s right you should be the first; but, Edward, this once let me see him, let me speak to him. He might be softer to his mother.’

There was a pause, and he did not know himself, still less did she know, whether he was to be angry or to yield. He had perhaps in his mind something of both. He detached his hand from hers with a little sharpness, but he said,

‘Go, then: you are right enough; perhaps you will manage him better than I.’

She went softly out of the room, while the girls sat over their cards in the circle of the lamplight. They had not paid much attention to the murmur of conversation behind them. They thought she had gone to see about some supper for Walter, who had probably been fasting all day, an idea which had also entered Ally’s mind as a right thing to do; but mother, they knew, would prefer to do it herself. She did not, however, in the first place, think of Walter’s supper. She went up the dim staircase, where there was scarcely any light, not taking any candle with her, and made her way along the dark passage to Walter’s door. He had no light, nor was there any sound as she opened the door softly and went in. Was it possible he was not there? The room was all dark, and not a murmur in it, not even the sound of breathing.

A dreadful chill of terror came over Lady Penton’s heart. She said, with a trembling voice,

‘Walter, Walter!’ with an urgent and frightened cry.

There was a sound of some one turning on the bed, and Walter’s voice said out of the dark, in a muffled and sullen tone,

‘What do you want, mother? I thought here I might have been left in peace.’

‘Wat!’ she cried, ‘in peace. Is this how you speak to me? Oh, my boy, where have you been?’

‘It can’t matter much where I’ve been. I’ve been doing no harm.’

‘No, dear. I never thought you had,’ said his mother, groping her way to the bedside and sitting down by him.

She put out her hand till it reached where his head was lying. His forehead was hot and damp, and he put her hand away fretfully.

‘You forget,’ he said, ‘I’m not a baby now.’

‘You are always my boy, Wat, and will be, however old you may grow. If your father was harsh, he did not mean it. Oh, why did you rush away like that without any breakfast? Walter, tell me the truth, have you had any-

thing to eat? have you had some dinner? Tell me the truth.'

There was a pause, and then he said,

'I forget; is that all you think of, mother?'

'No, Wat, not all I think of, but I think of that too. If I bring you up something, will you eat it, Wat?'

'For pity's sake let me alone,' he said, pettishly, 'and go away.'

'Walter!'

'Let me alone, mother, for to-night. I can't say anything to-night. I came to bed on purpose to be quiet; leave me alone for to-night.'

'If I do, Wat, you will hear us, you will not turn your back upon us to-morrow?'

'Good-night, mother,' said the lad.

He had turned his head away, but she bent over him and kissed his hot cheek.

'I will tell your father he is not to say anything. And I will leave you, since you want me. But you will take the advice of your best friends to-morrow, Wat.'

'Good-night, mother,' he said again, and turned his flushed and shame-faced cheek to

respond, since it was in the dark, to her kiss.

‘Wat, there is nobody in the world can love you as we do. God bless you, my dear,’ she said.

And, listening in the dark, he heard the faint sound of her soft footsteps receding, passing away into the depths of the silent house, leaving him not silent, not quiet, as he said, but with a wild world of intentions and impulses whirling within him, all agitation, commotion, revolution to his finger-ends.

CHAPTER IV.

POOR WALTER !

WHEN Walter, in ungovernable excitement, trouble, and impatience, rushed out of the house in the morning, leaving old Crockford to make he knew not what revelations to his father, he had no idea either what he was going to do, or how long it might be before he returned home. It might have been that he was leaving the Hook—his birthplace, the only home he had ever known—for years. He might never see all these familiar things again—the pale river winding round the garden, the poplar-tree, thin and naked, in the wind, the little multitude in the dining-room making a hum and murmur of voice as he darted past. In his imagination he

saw so clearly that breakfast-table—his mother dividing to each of the children their proper share. Ally and Anne, and little Molly, with her spoon, making flourishes, and calling, ‘Fader, fader!’ He saw them all with the distinctness of inward vision as he darted away, though his mind was full of another image.

The pang with which, even in the heat of his flight, he realised that he was going away, lay in the background of his heart, as that picture was in the background of his imagination; foremost was the idea of seeing *her* at once, of telling her that all was over here, and that he was ready to fly to the end of the world if she would but come with him, and that all should be as she pleased. He had forgotten the suggestion of last night about the oath which he would have to take as to his age. Nothing was apparent to him except that his secret was betrayed, that all was over, that *she* alone remained to him, and that nothing now stood between him and her.

He rushed up the hill to the cottage, feeling that reserves and concealments were no longer

necessary, that the moment of decision was come, and that there must be no more delay. He would not wait any longer patrolling about the house till she should see him from a window or hear his signal. He went up to the cottage door and knocked loudly. He must see her, and that without a moment's delay.

It seemed to Walter that he stood a long time knocking at the cottage door. He heard the sound of many goings and comings within, so that it was not because they were absent that he was not admitted. At last the door was opened suddenly by old Mrs. Crockford, who was deaf, and who made no answer to his demand except by shaking her head and repeating the quite unnecessary explanation that she was hard of hearing, backed by many curtseys and inquiries for the family.

‘My master’s out, Mr. Walter—Crockford’s not in, sir ; he’s gone to work, as he allays does. Shall I send him, sir, to the ’ouse when he comes in to ’is dinner ?’ she said, with many bobs and hopes as how her ladyship and all the family were well.

Whether this was all she knew, or whether the old woman was astute, and brought her infirmity to the aid of her wits, he could not tell.

‘I want to see your niece,’ he said—‘your niece—your niece Emmy; I want to see Emmy,’ without eliciting any further reply than,

‘My master’s out, Mr. Walter, and I’m a little ‘ard of ‘earing, sir.’

He raised his voice so that *she* must have heard him, and surely, surely, in the condition in which things were, ought to have answered him! But perhaps she was anxious to keep up appearances still. He said, in his loudest voice,

‘I am leaving home; I must see her:’ but even this produced no response: and at last he was obliged to go away, feeling as if all the machinery of life had come to a standstill, and that nothing remained for him to do.

He had abandoned one existence, but the other did not take him up. He roamed about for he scarcely knew how long, till the wintry sun was high in the sky, then came back, and in the audacity of despair—for so he felt it—

knocked again, this time softly, disguising his impatience, at the cottage door. He had acted wisely, it appeared, for she herself opened to him this time, receding from the door with a startled cry when she saw who it was. But this time he would not be put off. He followed her into the little room in front, which was a kind of parlour, adorned by the taste of Martha and her mother, cold, with its little fireplace decked out in cut paper, and the blind drawn down to protect it from the sun. He caught sight of a box, which seemed to be half-packed, and which she closed hastily and pushed away.

She turned upon him when he had followed inside this room, with an angry aspect that made poor Walter tremble.

‘Why do you hunt me down like this?’ she cried; ‘couldn’t you see I didn’t want you when you came this morning pushing your way into the house? Though it’s a cottage, still it’s my castle if I want to be private here!’

‘Emmy!’ cried the youth, with the keenest pang of misery in his voice.

‘Why do you call out my name like that?’

You objected to what I told you last night. Go away now. I don't want to have anything to say to a man that objects to my plans, as if didn't know what's right and what's wrong !'

'I object to nothing,' said the boy. 'You sent me away from you, you gave me no time to think. And now my father knows everything, and I have left home ; I shall never go back any more.'

'Left home ! And how does your father know everything ? And what is there to know ?'

'Nothing !' cried Walter— 'nothing except that I am yours, heart and soul—except that I desire nothing, think of nothing but you. And they had never heard of you before !'

She closed the door and pushed the chair towards him.

'How did they know about me ?—what do they know now ? Was it you that told them ? And what do they think ?' she cried, with a slight breathlessness that told of excitement.

Poor Walter was glad to sit down, he was faint and weary ; that rush out of doors into the frosty air without any breakfast, which had af-

fectured the imaginations of his family so much, had told on him. He felt that there was no strength in him, and that he was glad to rest.

‘It was old Crockford who told them,’ he said. ‘He came in upon me this morning like a—like a wolf: and my father of course heard, and came to see what it was.’

‘Oh,’ she said, in a tone of disappointment, not without contempt in it, ‘so it was not you! I thought perhaps, being so overwhelmed by what I said, you had gone right off and told your mother, as a good boy should. So it was only old Crockford? and I gave you the credit! But I might have known,’ she added, with a laugh, ‘you had not the courage for that!’

‘Courage! I did not think of it,’ he said. ‘It did not seem a thing to tell them. How was I to do it? And Crockford came—I don’t know what for—to forbid me the house.’

‘No; but to drive me out of it!’ she said, with a look which he did not understand. ‘So you hadn’t the courage,’ she said. ‘You have not much courage, Mr. Walter Penton, to be such a fine young man. You come here night

after night, and you pretend to be fond of me. But when it comes to the point you daren't say to your father and mother straight out, "Here's a girl I'm in love with, and I want to marry her. I'll do it as soon as I'm old enough, whether you like it or not; but if you were nice, and paid a little attention to her, it would be better for us all." That is what I should have said in your place. But you hadn't the heart, no more than you'd have had the heart to run a little risk about your age and say you were six months older than you are. That's like a man! You expect a girl to run every risk, to trust herself to you and her whole life; but to do anything that risks your own precious person, oh no! You have not the heart of a mouse—you have not the courage for that!"

She spoke with so much vehemence, her eyes flashing, the colour rising in her cheeks, that Walter could not say a word in his own defence—and, besides, what was there to say? So far was he from having the courage to broach the subject in his own person, that when it had been begun by Crockford he had not been able to

bear it, but had rushed away. He sat silent while she thus burst forth upon him, gazing at her as she towered over him in her indignation. He had seldom seen her in daylight, never so close, and never in this state of animation and passion.

His heart was wrung, but his imagination was on fire. She was a sort of warrior-maiden—a Britomart, a Clorinda. Her eyes blazed. Her lip, which was so full of expression, quivered with energy. To think that anyone should dare to think her beneath them!—of a lower sphere!—which was what he supposed his own family would do when they knew ; whereas she was a kind of goddess—a creature made of fire and flame. To brave his father, with her standing by to back him ; to deceive a registrar about a miserable matter of age—six months more or less—what did these matter ? What did anything matter in comparison with her ?—in comparison with pleasing her, with doing what she wished to be done ? He was a little afraid of her as she stood there, setting the very atmosphere on fire. If she ever belonged to

him, became his familiar in every act of his life, might there not arise many moments in which he should be afraid of what she might think or say? This thought penetrated him underneath the fervour of admiration in his soul, but it did not daunt him or make him pause.

He said, 'It is true I did not tell my father first. It did not come into my head. I can't be sure now that it's the thing to do. But when Crockford said what he did I told him it was so. It is the first time,' said Walter, with a little emotion, 'that I ever set myself against my father. It may come easier afterwards, but it's something to do it the first time. Perhaps you've never done it, though you are braver than I.'

She laughed loudly with a contempt that hurt him.

'Never done it! Never done anything else, you mean! I never got on with my mother since I was a baby; and father, I never had any—at least, I never saw him. Well, so you spoke up boldly, and said—what did you say?'

'Oh, don't bother me!' he cried. 'How can

I tell what I said? And now I've come away. I have left home, Emmy. I am ready to go with you, dear, anywhere—if you like, to the end of the world.'

'I've no wish for that,' she said, with a softer laugh. 'I'm going to London; that's quite enough for me.'

'Well,' cried the lad, 'I'll go with you there; and all can be settled—everything—as you will. It can be nothing wrong that is done for you.'

'Oh, you're thinking of the licence again,' she said; 'never mind that. I've been thinking too; and you can't have your money till you're twenty-one, don't you know? Swearing will do you no good there—they want certificates and all sorts of things. And of course you can't go to the end of the world, or even to London, without any money. So you must just wait and see what happens. Perhaps something will take place before then that will clear you altogether from me.'

He listened to the first part of this with mingled calm and alarm. To wait these six months, could he have seen her every day,

would not have disturbed Walter much, notwithstanding the blaze of boyish passion which had lighted up all the world to him. The idea of a new life, an entire revolution of all the circumstances round him, and the tremendous seriousness of marriage, had given him a thrill of almost alarm. It was a plunge which he was ready to take, and yet which appalled him. And when she said that he could not have his money till he was twenty-one, a sensation half of annoyance, yet more than half of content, came over his soul. He could bear it well enough if only he could see her every day ; but, when she added that threat about the possibility of something happening, Walter's heart jumped up again in his breast.

‘What can happen?’ he said. ‘Dear, nothing shall happen. If you are going to London, I’ll go too—I must be near where you are—I’ve no home to go back to. London will be the best ; it’s like the deep sea, everybody says. Nobody will find me there.’

‘You must not be too sure of that. Sir Edward Penton’s son could be found anywhere. They

will put your arrival in the papers, don't you know?—"At Mivart's, Mr. Walter Penton, from the family seat."'

She broke off with a laugh. Walter, gazing at her, was entirely unaware what she meant. The fashionable intelligence of the newspapers, though his mother might possibly give an eye to it, was a blank to him; and, when she met his serious impassioned look, the girl herself was affected by it. It was so completely sincere and true that her trifling nature was impressed in spite of everything. She despised him in many ways, though she was not without a certain liking for him. She was contemptuous of his ignorance, of the self-abandonment which made him ready to follow her wherever she went, even of his passion for herself.

Emmy was very philosophical, nay, a little cynical in her views. She was ready to say and believe that there were many prettier girls than herself within Walter's reach, and the idea that he cared for anything but her prettiness did not occur to this frank young woman. But the look of absolute sincerity in the poor boy's eyes

touched her in spite of herself. She put her hands on his shoulders with a momentary mute caress, which meant sudden appreciation, sudden admiration, like that with which an elder sister might have regarded the generous impulse of a boy; then withdrew laughing from the closer approach which Walter, blushing to his hair, and springing to his feet, ventured upon in response.

‘No, no,’ she cried, ‘run away now. You can come back later; I’m very busy, I’ve got my packing to look after, and a hundred things to do—there’s a dear boy, run away now.’

‘I am not a boy, at least not to you,’ he cried, ‘not to you; you must not send me away.’

‘But I must, and I do. How can I get my things ready with you hanging about? Run away, run away, do; and you can come back later, after it’s dark—not till after it’s dark. And then—and then——’ she said.

He obeyed her after a while, moved by the vague beatitude of that anticipation: ‘And then——’ Nothing but the highest honour and

tenderness was in the young man's thoughts. He did not know indeed what to do when he should reach London with that companion, where he could take her, how arrange matters for her perfect security and welfare until the moment when he should be able to make her his wife. But somehow, either by her superior knowledge, or by that unfailing force of pure and honest purpose which Walter felt must always find the right way, this should be done.

He went away from her cheered and inspired. But when he had got out of sight of the cottage he was not clear what to do for the long interval that must elapse; home he could not go—where should he go? He thought over the question with the icy blast in his face as he turned towards the east. And then he came to a sudden resolution, not indeed consciously inspired by Emmy, but which came from her practical impulse. In another mood, at another stage, her suggestion about his money might have shocked and startled him.

It seemed now only a proof of her superior wisdom and good sense, the perfection of mind

which he felt to be in her as well as the sweetness of manner and speech, the feeling, the sentiment, all the fine qualities for which he gave her credit, and for which he adored her, not only for the beauty in which alone she believed. And if he was about to do this bold and splendid thing, to carry off the woman he loved, and marry her by whatever means—and are not all means sanctified by love?—surely, certainly, whatever else might be necessary, he would want money.

Having made up his mind on this point, Walter buttoned his coat, and set off for Reading like an arrow from a bow. There he managed to dine with great appetite, which would have been a comfort to his mother had she known it, and had an interview with Mr. Rochford, the solicitor, on the subject of the money which had been left to him (as he preferred to think) by old Sir Walter, the result of which was that he got with much ease a sum of fifty pounds (to Walter a fortune in itself), with which in his pocket he walked back with a tremendous sense of guilty elation, excitement, and trouble.

He lingered on the road until after dark, as she had said, until, as he remembered so acutely, the hour of the evening meal at home, when the family would be all gathering, and everyone asking, Where is Wat? He had rebelled before against the coercion of that family meal. This time it drew him with a kind of lingering desire which he resisted, he who before had half despised himself for obeying the habit and necessity of it. He went to his old post under the hedge, not knowing whether Emmy wished her departure with him to be known. For himself he did not care. If everybody he knew were to appear, father and mother, and all the authorities to whom he had ever been subject, he would have taken her hand and led her away before their faces. So he said to himself as he waited in the cold, half indignant, at that wonderful moment of his fate, that any concealment should be necessary.

The cottage was all dark; there was not even a light in the upper window, such as was sometimes there, to make him aware that she looked for him. Not a glimmer of light and

not a sound. The cottage seemed like a place of the dead. It seemed to him so much more silent than usual that he took fright after a while, and this, in addition to his feeling that the time for secrecy was over, emboldened him in his impatience. He went up to the cottage door and knocked repeatedly more and more loudly after a while, with a sensation of alarm. Was it possible that old deaf Mrs. Crockford was alone in the house? He had time to get into a perfect fever of apprehension before he heard a heavy step coming from behind, and the door was opened to him by Crockford himself, who filled up the whole of the little passage. The old man had a candle in his hand.

‘What, is it you, Mr. Walter?’ he cried, astonished.

‘Where is she?’ said Walter. ‘What have you done with her? Will you tell her I am here?’

He could not speak of her familiarly by her name to this man. But Crockford had no such delicacy; he stared Walter in the face, looking

at him across the flame of the candle, which waved and flickered in the night air.

‘Emmy!’ he said. ‘Why, Mr. Walter, she’s gone hours ago!’

‘Gone! Where has she gone? You’ve driven her away. Some one has been here and driven her away!’

‘Ay, Mr. Walter! The fly at the “Penton Arms” as she ordered herself to catch the two-o’clock train—that’s what drove her away, and thankful we was to be quit of her; and so should you be, my young gentleman, if you was wise. She’s a little——’

‘Hold your tongue!’ cried Walter. ‘Who has driven her away? Is it my father?—is it—Some one has been here to interfere. Silence! If you were not an old man I’d knock you down.’

‘Silence, and asking me a dozen questions? That’s consistent, that is! There’s been nobody here—not a soul. She’s gone as she intended. She told my old woman as soon as she heard I’d been down at the house. I didn’t believe her, but she’s kept her word. All the better for

you, Mr. Walter, if you only could see it; all the better, sir. She's not the same as you think. She's——'

'Silence!' cried Walter again. 'I don't believe she has gone away at all; you are making up a story; you are trying to deceive me!'

At this old Crockford opened the door wider and bid him enter, and Walter, with eyes which were hot and painful, as if the blood had got into them, stared in, not knowing what he did. He had no desire to investigate. He knew well enough that it was true. She had sent him out of the way and then she had gone. She had not thought him worth the trouble. She had wanted to get rid of him. This sudden blow awoke no angry flush of pride, as it ought to have done. He felt no blame of her in his mind; instead, he asked himself what he had done to disgust her with him. It must be something he had done. He had disgusted her with his folly—with his hesitation about transgressing any puritanical habits of thought for her sake: and then by his talk about his home. He remembered her flash of disappointment, of contempt, when he

had owned that it was not he who had told his father. Of course she had despised him, how could he think otherwise ? She was ready to trust herself to him, and he had not been strong enough to make the least sacrifice for her. He turned and went away from Crockford's door without a word.

And after that he did not know very well how he got through the weary hours. He walked to the railway-station and prowled all about with a forlorn sort of hope that she might have missed her train. And then quite suddenly it occurred to him, having nothing else to do, that he might go home. He went, as has been seen, to his room in the dark, and sent his mother away with an entreaty to be left alone. He was not touched by his mother's voice, or her touch or blessing. He was impatient of them, his mind being full of other things. His mind, indeed, was full of Emmy—full to bursting. It might be well for him that she was gone, if he could have thought so. He half agreed to that in his soul. But he would not think so. Had he carried her off triumphantly his mind

would have been full of a hundred tremors, but to lose her now was more than he could bear. He lay thinking it all over, longing for the morning, in the dark, without candle or any other comfort, sleeping now and then, waking only to a keener consciousness. And then he became aware, by some change in the chill, for there was none in the light, that it was morning.

He got up in the dark—he had not undressed, but had been lying on the bed with the coverlet drawn over him in his morning clothes. It was very cold and blank, the skies all gloom, the river showing one pale gleam and no more. He got up as quietly as he could, and stole downstairs and opened stealthily the house-door. No one was stirring, not even the servants, though in so full a house they were always early. The fresh morning air blew in his face and refreshed him. He felt his fifty pounds in his pocket. He scarcely thought of the misery he would leave behind him. Long enough, he said to himself, he had been bound by the family, now his own life was in question,

and he must act for himself. There was a train at half-past six which he could catch. How different it was from his night drive so short a time ago! Then he was acting reluctantly for others, now willingly for himself. The cold air blew in his face with a dash of rain in it. He shut the gate quietly not to make a noise, but never looked back.

CHAPTER V.

THE LOST SON.

THE parents respected poor Wat's seclusion, his misery and trouble, though it was so hard to keep away from him; not to go and talk to him, remonstrating or consoling; not to carry him a tray, to implore him to eat a little. They resisted all these impulses: the last, perhaps, was the most difficult. Lady Penton had to call to her all the forces of her mind, to strengthen herself by every consideration of prudence, before she could overcome the burning desire which came back and back, with renewed temptation, a hundred times in the course of the evening to take up that tray. A few sandwiches, a little claret, or some beer would have

done him no harm ; and who could tell whether he had eaten enough to sustain his strength in the course of the day ? But, what with her own self-reminders that it was wiser to leave him to himself, what with the half-taunts, half-remonstrances of her husband,—‘ If I am not to say a word to him, which I believe is nonsense, why should you ? ’—holding herself, as it were, with both hands, she managed to refrain.

The first time that such a breach comes into a family—that one member of it withdraws in darkness and silence into his own room, not to be disturbed, not to be found fault with, not even to be comforted—till to-morrow—how keen is the pang of the separation, how poignant the sense of his solitude and anguish ! In such circumstances it is the culprit generally who suffers least. The grieved and perhaps angered parents, pondering what to say to him, how to do what is best for him, how not to say too much, afraid to make the fault appear too grave, afraid to make too little of it, casting about in their anxious souls what to do : the brothers and sisters looking on in the back-

ground, questioning each other with bated breath, their imaginations all busy with that too touching, too suggestive picture of the offender in his room, left to himself, eating nothing, communicating with nobody—how dreadful when it is for the first time! what a heartbreaking and hopeless wretchedness when custom has made it common, and there is no longer any confidence in remonstrance or appeal. It is generally some evident breach of the proprieties or minor morals that is the cause of such a domestic event. But this time nobody knew what Walter had done. What had he done? it could not be anything wrong. He had quarrelled with father: to be sure that was as though the heavens had fallen: but yet it could only be a mistake. Father no doubt had been impatient; Wat had been affronted. They had not waited, either of them, to explain. The girls made it clear to each other in this way. At all events, it was all over now. No doubt poor Wat had spent a miserable day: but no one would remind him of it by a word, by so much as a

look, and it was all over, and would be remembered no more.

The parents got up in the morning with many a troubled thought. They asked each other what it would be best to say. Perhaps it would be wisest to say as little as possible: perhaps only to point out to him that, in his position, now truly the heir of Penton, any premature matrimonial project would be ruinous: that he was far too young; that in any case, supposing the lady were the most eligible person in the world, it would be necessary to wait.

‘If that is what he is thinking of,’ said Sir Edward.

‘What else could he be thinking of?’ cried Lady Penton.

Or if perhaps it was only a passing folly, a foolish little flirtation, nothing serious at all? Then perhaps a few words only, to remind him that in his position one must not do such things, one must not lead a silly girl to form expectations——

‘Oh, bother the silly girl!’ said Sir Edward; ‘what are her expectations to us? It is Wat I am thinking of.’

‘Dear Edward,’ said the mother, ‘he will be far, far more likely to see the folly of it if you show him that it might have a bad effect upon another.’

At this Sir Edward shook his head, thinking that his wife did not here show her usual good sense, but he made no objection in words, and finally it was decided between them that as little as possible was to be said, nothing at all at first, and that the poor boy was to be allowed to have his breakfast in peace.

But at breakfast Walter did not appear. It was thought at first that he was late on purpose, waiting perhaps till the children had finished—till he might have a hope of being alone; or at least, if he had to face his father, to secure that no one else should be present when he was called to account. By-and-by, however, a thrill of alarm began to be felt; and then came a terrible disclosure which froze their very blood—Gardener coming to his work very early

in the morning had met Mr. Walter leaving the house. He had on his big greatcoat and a bag in his hand, and he was in a great hurry, as a man might be who was bent on catching the seven o'clock train.

Walter's room was searched at once in case he should have left a note or anything to explain: but there was not a scrap of explanation. He was gone, that was clear. He had taken some linen, a change of dress in his bag; his drawers were left open, and all the contents thrown about, as is usual when a man selects for himself a few articles of dress to take with him. The look of these drawers carried dismay to his mother's heart. He was gone. Where had he gone? So young, so little accustomed to independent action, so ignorant of the world! Where had the boy gone? what had happened to him? Lady Penton recollected after the event, as we so often do, that Walter had made no response to her suggestions of what was to be said and done to-morrow. He had answered 'Good-night, mother,' and no more; that was no answer. He had never said

he would accept her advice to-morrow, that he would discuss what had happened, or hear what his father had to say. ‘Good-night, mother,’ that was all he had said. And oh! she might have known, when he eluded the subject in this way—she might have known! She ought to have been on her guard.

Sir Edward said very little; his face grew dark with anger and indignation, and he walked off at once in the direction of the village without saying where he meant to go. All at once from their happiness and unsuspecting peace the family plunged into that depth of dismay and misery which comes with the first great family anxiety. It seemed to them all who were old enough to understand anything about it that a great shame and horror had come into the midst of them. Walter had left home without a word; they did not know where he was, or why he had gone, or in whose company. Could anything be more terrible? Just grown to man’s estate, and he had disappeared, and no one knew where he had gone!

The period that followed is beyond descrip-

tion in these pages. Out of the clear serenity of innocent life this blameless household fell—as into an abyss of terror and shame, of new experiences unthought of, and new conditions. The girls, with a gasp, behind backs, scarcely daring to look at each other, heard their mother say to Mab, who was so great an aggravation of their trouble, that Walter had gone—to town on business; that he had preparations to make and things to get before he went to Oxford. Lady Penton said this in a voice which scarcely faltered, looking the visitor, who was so sadly out of place in the midst of the agitated company, in the face all the time.

‘Oh, to be sure,’ said Mab, ‘they always do. Any excuse is good enough for gentlemen, don’t you think, Lady Penton? they are always so pleased to get to town.’

Lady Penton looked quite gratefully at the girl.

‘Yes,’ she said; ‘they all like it.’

‘And so should I,’ said little Mab, ‘if I were a boy.’

It was not of any importance what little Mab

said, and yet it was astonishing how it comforted Lady Penton. She said to the girls afterwards that living so quietly as they had all done made people disposed to make mountains out of mole-hills.

‘But you see that little girl thinks it quite a common sort of thing,’ she said.

But Sir Edward’s gloomy face was not a thing that was capable of any disguise. He was in movement the whole day long. He went all about, taking long walks, and next day went up to London, and was absent from morning to night. He never said anything, nor did the girls venture to question him. There seemed to have grown a great difference between them—a long, long interval separating him from his daughters. He had long private conversations with his wife when he came back; indeed, she would withdraw into the book-room when she saw him coming, as if to be ready for him. And they would shut themselves up and talk for an hour at a time, with a continuous low murmur of voices.

‘Oh, mother, tell us,’ Ally or Anne would

cry when they could find her alone for a moment, 'is there any news? has father found anything out?' to which Lady Penton would reply, with a shake of her head,

'Your father hopes to find him very soon. Oh, don't ask questions! I am not able to answer you,' she would say.

This seemed to go on for ages—for almost a lifetime—so that they began to forget how peaceful their lives had been before; and to go into Walter's room, which they did constantly, and look at his bed, made up in cold order and tidiness, never disturbed. To see it all so tidy, not even a pair of boots thrown about or a tie flung on the table, made their hearts die within them. It was as if Walter were dead—almost worse. It seemed more dreadful than death to think that they did not know where he was.

And Mab stayed on for one long endless week. Some one of them had always to be with her, trying to amuse her; talking, or making an effort to talk. Lady Penton was the one who succeeded best. She would let the girl chatter to her for an hour together, and

never miss saying the right thing in the right place, or giving Mab the appropriate smile and encouragement. How could she do it? the girls wondered and asked each other. Did she like that little chatter? How did she bear it? Did it make her forget? Or, finally—a suggestion which they hardly dared to make—did mother not care so very much? Was that possible?

When one is young and very young, one cannot believe that the older people suffer as one feels one's self to suffer. It seems impossible that they can do it. They go steadily on and order dinner every day, and point out to the housemaid when she has not dusted as she ought. This suggestion to the housemaid (which they called scolding Mary) was a great stumbling-block to the girls. They did not understand how their mother could be very miserable about Walter, and yet find fault, nay, find out at all the dust upon the books. They themselves lived in a world suddenly turned into something different from the world they had known, where the air kept whispering as if it had a message to deliver, and sounds were about

the house at night as of some one coming, always coming, who never came. They had not known what the mystery of the darkness was before, the great profundity of night in which somewhere their brother might be wandering homeless, in what trouble and distress who could tell? or what aching depths of distance was in the great full staring daylight, through which they gazed and gazed and looked for him, but never saw him.

How intolerable Mab became with her chatter; how they chafed even at their mother's self-command, and the steadiness with which she went on keeping the house in order, it would be difficult to say. Their father, though they scarcely ventured to speak to him in his self-absorbed and resentful gloom, had more of their sympathy. He not only suffered, but looked as if he suffered. He lost his colour, he lost his appetite, he was restless, incapable of keeping still. He could no longer bear the noise of the children, and sickened at the sight of food. And there was Mab all the time, to whom Lady Penton had told that story about Walter, but

who, they felt sure, knew better, having learned to read their faces, and to see the restrained misery, the tension of suspense. Oh, if this spectator, this observer, with her quick eyes, which it was so difficult to elude, would but go away!

At last it was announced that the Russell Pentons were coming to fetch her, an event which the household regarded with mingled relief and alarm. Sir Edward's face grew gloomier than ever.

'They have come to spy out the nakedness of the land,' he said; 'Alicia will divine what anxiety we are in, and she will not be sorry.'

'Oh, hush, Edward,' said his wife; 'we do not want her to be sorry. Why should she be sorry? she knows nothing.'

'You think so,' he cried; 'but depend upon it everybody knows.'

'Why should everybody know? Nobody shall know from me; and the girls will betray nothing. They know nothing, poor children. If you will only try to look a little

cheerful yourself, and keep up appearances——’

‘Cheerful!’ he said, with something of the same feeling as the girls had, that she could not surely care so much.

Was it possible that she did not care? But nevertheless he tried to do something to counteract that droop of his mouth, and make his voice a little more flexible and natural, when the sound of the wheels on the gravel told that the Pentons had come. Meanwhile Mab had gone, attended by the sisters, to make her preparations for going. They had packed her things for her, an office to which she was not accustomed, while she mourned over her departure, and did their best not to show her that this was a feeling they did not share.

Mab lingered a little after the carriage arrived. She wanted to show her sympathy, though it was not quite easy to see how that was to be done. She remained silent for a minute or so, and then she said,

‘I haven’t liked to say anything, but I’ve been very, very sorry;’ giving Ally a sudden kiss as she spoke.

The two girls looked at each other, as was their wont, and Anne, who was always the most prompt, asked,

‘Sorry for what?’

‘Do you really, really not know where he is?’ said Mab, without pausing to reply. ‘I think I could tell you where he is. He is in town with—some one——’

‘Some one?’ they both cried, with a sudden pang of excitement, as though they were on the verge of a discovery; for unless she knew something—though how could she know anything?—it seemed impossible that she could speak so.

‘Oh, the one he went out every night to see. There must have been somebody. When they go out every night like that it is always to see—some one,’ she said, nodding her head in the certainty of her superior knowledge of the world.

‘Oh, how do you know? You are mistaken if you think that Walter—how can you know about such things?’

‘Because I am little,’ said Mab, ‘and not very

old, that's not to say that I haven't been a great deal about: and I've heard people talking. They pretend they don't talk before girls. I suppose they think they don't. They stop themselves just enough to make you want to find out, and then they forget you are there, and say all sorts of things. That's where he is, you may be sure: and he will come back by-and-by, especially if he wants money. You needn't be afraid. That is what they all do. Oh, listen; they are calling us from downstairs! I am so sorry I must go: I wish I could stay: I like this better than any place I ever stayed at, and you've all been so kind. Write to me and tell me, will you, all about it? I shall be anxious to know. But don't make yourselves miserable, for he will come back when he has spent his money, or when—— Yes, we are coming! We are coming! Ally, mind you write and tell me. I shall want so much to know.'

They tried to interrupt her again and again, to tell her she was mistaken; that Walter had only gone to town; that they were not anxious,

or ignorant where he was, or unhappy about him: with much more to the same effect; but Mab's cheerful certainty that she was right overpowered their faltering affirmations, of which she took no notice. She kissed them both with enthusiasm in the midst of her little harangue, and ran on with expressions of her regret as they went downstairs.

'Oh, I wish Lady Penton would have me for good,' Mab said; 'but you don't care for me as I do for you.'

Meanwhile, in the drawing-room, Lady Penton was receiving her visitors with an eager cordiality that was scarcely consistent with her nature, and which was meant to show not only that she was entirely at her ease, but that her husband's gloom, which he had tried to shake off, but not very successfully, did not mean anything. As a matter of fact, the Russell Pentons, knowing nothing of the circumstances of Walter's disappearance, were quite unaware of any effort, or any reason why an effort should be made. They interpreted the husband's half-resentful looks—for that was the natural aspect of distress

with Edward Penton—and the excessive courtesy and desire to please, of his wife, as fully accounted for by the position towards each other in which the two families stood. Why should Edward Penton be resentful? He had got his rights, those rights upon which he had stood so strongly when his Cousin Alicia had paid her previous visit. She was ready to put a private interpretation of her own on everything she saw. He had resisted then her proposals and overtures, although afterwards he had been anxious to accede to them; and now he was disappointed and vexed that the bargain against which he had stood out at first had come to nothing, and that she would not relieve him from the burden of the expensive house which he had first refused to give up and then been so anxious to be quit of. How inconsistent! How feeble! And the wife endeavouring with her little fuss of politeness to make up, perhaps thinking that she might succeed where her husband had failed! This was how Mrs. Russell Penton interpreted the aspect of the poor people whose object was to conceal their

unhappiness from all eyes, and that nobody might have a word to say against the boy who was racking their hearts.

‘I have been sorry to leave Mab so long, to give you the trouble,’ Mrs. Russell Penton said, with her stiff dignity. ‘Her uncle, in his consideration for me, did not think of your inconvenience, I fear.’

‘There has been no inconvenience. We are so many that one more or less does not matter. We have treated her without ceremony, as one of the family——’

‘And made her very happy, evidently,’ said Russell Penton. ‘She is very unwilling to come away.’

And then there was a pause. That Mab Russell, the heiress, should be treated as one of the family by these poor Pentons was to Alicia a reversal of every rule which she could scarcely accept without a protest.

‘It must have been a glimpse of life very different from anything she has been accustomed to,’ she said at last.

‘Yes, poor little thing! with no brothers or sisters of her own.’

‘She has compensations,’ said Russell Penton, with a glimmer of humour in his eyes. But Lady Penton looked at him without any response in hers. He was so surprised at this, and bewildered that Mab’s value should not be known, that involuntarily, out of the commotion in his own mind, he put a question which seemed full of meaning to the troubled listeners. ‘I don’t see your son,’ he said.

The father and mother exchanged a miserable look.

‘It is known, then,’ their eyes said to each other; and in spite of herself the blood rushed to Lady Penton’s face and then ebbed away again, leaving her faint and pallid; but she made an effort at a smile.

‘Walter,’ she said, ‘is not at home. He is going to Oxford in a month or two, and he is away for a little.’

‘Taking a holiday?’ suggested Russell Penton, with a curious consciousness, though

without any understanding, of trouble in the air.

‘Oh, it is rather—business,’ said the mother. Sir Edward did not change that aspect of severe gravity which he had borne all the time. He had too much set wretchedness in his face to change as she did. ‘You have been more good to him,’ she continued, glad of the excuse which justified her trembling voice, ‘more good than words can say.’

‘I have no right to any credit: I only carried out my father’s wishes,’ said Mrs. Penton.

How severe her tone was! how clear that she was aware that Walter, the recipient of her kindness, had shown himself unworthy! If anything could have made these poor people more unhappy it was this—that their precautions seemed useless, and their trouble known.

CHAPTER VI.

KEEPING UP APPEARANCES.

THE Russell Pentons stayed a long time—at least, these anxious people thought so, who believed their visitors to be noting the signs of their unhappiness, and forming still stronger and stronger conclusions against their son. The effort Lady Penton made to carry on the conversation was one of those efforts, gigantic, unappreciated, in which women have sometimes to make an expenditure of strength which is equal to years of ordinary exertion. Who can tell the burden it was to talk, to smile, to exhaust all the trivial subjects that occurred to her, to keep at a distance all those grave topics which might bring in Walter—which might lead to dis-

cussion of where he was or how employed? She saw, so to speak, half-a-mile off those tendencies of conversation which might lead to him, and, with a sudden leap, would get away from these to another and another theme, which each in its turn would have to be dismissed and avoided.

‘All roads lead to Rome,’ says the proverb: and, when there is a certain subject which it is desirable to avoid, all the streamlets of conversation, by some curious tendency, go to that with infallible force. Lady Penton had to go through a series of mental gymnastics to avoid it—to keep her visitors from any thought of Walter—to hide him, or rather to hide the terrible blank in the house where he ought to have been.

Had he been in his usual place, the conversation would never have touched him; and, as a matter of fact, the Russell Pentons did not think of him any more than they did of Horry in the nursery, a stray shout from whom could sometimes be heard, leaving no one in any doubt as to his whereabouts. But the mother, flying from sub-

ject to subject, talking as she had never been known to talk in her life before, and her taciturn husband, who said not a word that he could help saying—both felt that their misery was open and evident, that the Russell Pentons were saying in their hearts, ‘Poor people!’ or making reflections that the boy’s upbringing must have been bad indeed when he had ‘gone wrong’ at such an early age. Lady Penton felt instinctively that this was what must be going through Alicia’s mind. The childless woman always says so—it is one of the common-places of morals. If he had been brought up as he ought, he would not have gone wrong. This and a hundred other things went buzzing through the poor mother’s head, confusing her as she talked and talked.

‘Oh,’ she said to herself, ‘it is better that they should think that!—better blame us—blame *me*, who have been over-indulgent, perhaps, or over-severe—over-anything, so long as they do not blame *him*!’

But the father was not so disinterested; he was angry as well as miserable. He would

have had Walter bear his own guilt; he would not allow those critics who had never had a son to say that it was the parents' fault. So he stood with that resentment in his face, saying so little, only making an annoyed remark when appealed to, short, with suppressed temper in it, while his wife smiled and ran on. How like Edward Penton that was! his cousin thought. He had made a proposal to her which she, in her pride, would not accept, and his pride could not forgive her. Alicia felt that she understood it all—as well as the silly attempt of the wife to smooth it all over and make peace between them—as if the two Pentons did not understand each other better than any outsider! as if this question between them could be smoothed away by her!

‘You will let me come back again?’ said Mab, rubbing her little cheek like a kitten against Lady Penton’s ear. ‘I will never go away unless you say that I may come back.’

‘What a threat!’ said Russell Penton. ‘In order to get rid of you, Mab, the promise will have to be made.’

‘Not to get rid of her: we don’t want to get rid of her. Yes, my dear, certainly, as soon—as soon as we are settled, when the house is not so dull——’

‘It isn’t dull, no one can be dull with you. I will tell you what I want in a whisper. I want to come and stay altogether; I want you to have me altogether,’ said Mab, in the confidence of her wealth.

‘My dear!’ cried Lady Penton, faltering. In spite of her preoccupations she was a little alarmed. She put it off with a kiss of farewell. ‘You must come as often as you like,’ she said. ‘It is sweet of you to wish to come. We shall always be glad to see you, either here or—wherever we may be.’

‘At Penton,’ said Mab, once more rubbing her little head against the woman to whom she clung. ‘Uncle Russell, oh, ask her to have me! there is no place where I could be so happy.’

‘You must come as soon as we are settled,’ said Lady Penton, in real panic, putting the suppliant away.

Alicia had turned during this too tender and prolonged leave-taking, with a little indignation, to the master of the house. She had never herself either attracted or been attracted to Mab, and she felt resentful, annoyed, even jealous—though she cared nothing for the little thing and her whims—of this sudden devotion. She stood by her cousin, who was resentful and indignant too.

‘Edward,’ she said to him, ‘we needn’t quarrel, at least. I know you meant well in offering me Penton. Don’t be displeased because I couldn’t accept it—I couldn’t, from anyone, unless it had been my right.’

‘Penton! do you think of nothing but Penton?’ he cried, suddenly, with an incomprehensible impatience of the subject—that subject which had once seemed so important, which appeared to him so small now.

‘I speak for the sake of peace,’ she said, coldly; ‘that need not stand between us now. We go away in a week. The things I mean to remove will be gone within a month. What I wish you to know is, that you may make

arrangements for your removal as soon as you please.'

'Oh, for our removal! yes, yes,' he said, impatiently; 'there is no hurry about that: if that was all one had to think of——'

'I am sorry that you should have other things to think of. To me it seems very important,' Mrs. Russell Penton said.

'Ah! you have nobody but yourself to be concerned about,' he said. But then he met his wife's look of warning, and added no more.

Russell Penton lingered a little behind the rest.

'Let me speak a word to you,' he said, detaining Lady Penton; and her heart, which had begun to beat feebly as an end approached to this excitement, leaped up again with an energy which made her sick and faint. Could he know something about Walter? might he have some news to tell her? Her face flushed, and then became the colour of ashes, a change of which he was wonderingly aware, though without a notion as to why it was. 'You are alarmed,' he said, 'about——'

‘No, no!’ she interrupted, faintly; ‘not alarmed. Oh, no, you must not think so—not frightened at all,’ but with fear pale and terrible, and suspense which was desperate, in every line of her countenance.

Russell Penton himself grew frightened too.

‘There is nothing to alarm you,’ he said, ‘about little Mab.’

‘Oh!’ the breath which had almost failed her came back. A sudden change came over her face: she smiled, though her smile was ghastly. ‘About—Mab?’ she said.

‘It is alarming, the way in which she flings herself upon you; but you must let me explain. I see that you think her just a little girl like any other, and her proposal to come and stay with you altogether is enough to make even the most generous pause. But that is not what she means, Lady Penton. She is very rich; she is a little heiress.’

The words did not seem to convey much significance to Lady Penton’s bewildered soul.

‘A little heiress,’ she repeated, vaguely, as if that information threw no light upon the matter.

Was she stupid? he asked himself, or ridiculously disinterested, altogether unlike the other women who have sons?

‘Very rich—really with a great fortune—but no home. She is too young to live by herself. She has never developed the domestic affections before. I should like very well to keep her, but it would be a burden on Alicia. Will you think it over? She has evidently set her heart on you, and it would do her so much good to be with people she cared for. There would of course be a very good allowance, if you will let me say so. Do think it over.’

They had reached the door by this time, where Sir Edward was solemnly putting his cousin into her carriage. Mr. Russell Penton pressed Lady Penton’s hand with a little meaning as he said good-bye.

‘Walter might have a try too,’ he said, with a laugh, as he turned away.

Walter might have—a try. A try at what? His mother’s head swam. She put her arm through that of Anne, who stood near her, and kept smiling, waving her hand to Mab in the

carriage; but Lady Penton scarcely saw what she was looking at. There was something moving, dazzling before her eyes—the horses, the glitter of the panels, the faces, flickered before her; and then came a rush of sound, the horses' hoofs, the carriage wheels grinding the gravel, and they were gone. Oh, how thankful she felt when they were gone! The girls led her in, frightened by her failing strength, and then Sir Edward came, as gloomy as ever, and leaned over her.

‘I don't think they knew,’ he said; ‘I don't think they had heard anything.’

Lady Penton repeated to herself several times over, ‘Walter might have a try,’ and then she too burst forth,

‘No, Edward, thank God! I am sure they did not know.’

He shook his head, though he was so much relieved, and said, half-reluctant to confess that he was relieved,

‘But, if it lasts much longer, they must know. How can it be kept from them, and from everybody, if it lasts much longer?’

The girls looked at each other, but did not speak; for they were aware, though no one else was, that Mab *knew*; and could it be supposed that *that* little thing, who did not belong to them, who had no reason for sharing their troubles, would keep it to herself and never tell?

They had all thought it would be a relief to be rid of the little spectator and critic, the stranger in the house, and for a time it was so. The rest of the afternoon after she was gone the girls and their mother spent together talking it all over. They had never been able uninterruptedly to talk it over before, and there was a certain painful enjoyment in going over every detail, in putting all the facts they knew together, and comparing their views. Sir Edward had gone out to take one of his long solemn walks, from which he always came in more gloomy, more resentful than ever. He was going up to town once more to-morrow. Once more! He had gone up almost every day, but never had discovered anything, never had found the lost. And in his absence, and freed from

Mab, whom they had not been able to get rid of at any moment, what a long, long consultation they had, talking over everything, except what Mab had suggested. She had said it with the intention of consoling, but the girls could not repeat it to each other, or breathe to their mother the suggestion she had made.

They were not educated to that point. That their brother should have married foolishly, made an idol of some girl who was not his equal, and followed her out into the unknown world, was dreadful, but comprehensible; but that he should come back by-and-by when he wanted money—oh, no, no! What they imagined was that scene so well-known to romance—the foolish young pair coming back, stealing in, he leading her, ashamed yet proud of her, to ask his parents' forgiveness. The girls went over the details of this scene again and again as soon as they had heard all that their mother had to tell them.

‘She must be beautiful,’ they said; ‘she may be nice—oh, she must be nice, or Wat would not love her!’

‘Oh, my dears,’ cried Lady Penton, ‘how can we tell? It is not good girls and nice girls who lead young men away from their duty.’

‘But, mother, if they love each other!’ said Ally, blushing over all her ingenuous, innocent countenance, with the awe and wonder of that great thing.

Lady Penton did not say anything more, but she shook her head, and then it was for the first time that there came over her the poignant suggestion of that ‘might have been’ which she had not taken into her mind till now. Walter might have a try; little Mab with her heiressship had been thrown at his head, as people say; and what it might have been had these two taken to each other—had a great fortune been poured into Penton!

Lady Penton had never known what a great piece of good fortune was; she was not one who expected such things. The very advantages of it, the desirableness, made it to her temperate soul the less likely. It never could have come to pass, all the contrarities of nature were against it; but still, when she thought that they

had spent so many days under the same roof, and might have spent so many more, and how suitable it would have been, and what a good thing for Walter, it was not wonderful that she should sigh. But that was the course of nature, it was the way of human affairs. It was too good ever to come true.

After the first night, the relief of Mab's departure was not so evident to them. She had been a restraint, not only upon their conversations and consultations, but on the entire abandonment of their life and thoughts to this anxiety and distress. They had been compelled on her account to bear the strain, to make a struggle against it. Now there was no longer that motive. Night and day their ears were intent on every sound; there was always a watcher at the window in the staircase, which commanded the ascending path to the village, a sort of look-out woman ready to dash downstairs and give notice if by chance—ah! no, by the blessing of God—the wanderer might be seen coming home.

The watch here was furtive, lest the ser-

vants should note, but it was continual; one or another was always lingering about, looking out with eyes keen and sharp with anxiety—‘busy in the distance shaping things, that made the heart beat thick.’ And so the days passed on, languishing, with dark nights so endless-long in which the anxious watchers could hear only and could not see.

CHAPTER VII.

ALLY'S PART.

SIR EDWARD PENTON went to London most days, but he never found out anything. He was not the sort of man to act as an amateur detective, and he would not appeal to the professionals in that capacity. He was an old-fashioned man, and it seemed to him that 'to set the police after' his son was an indignity impossible. He could not do it. He tramped about himself, yearning, angry, very tender underneath, thinking if he could only see Walter, meet him, which always seems so likely to country people, in the street, that all would be well.

He went to all the places Crockford could tell

him of—to Emmy's mother, a faded old actress of the lower class, whose faded graces, and her vivacity, and what had been, or had been supposed to be, her fascination, made poor Sir Edward's heart sink into his boots. But she professed to know nothing of her daughter's movements, and nothing at all of any gentleman. There had been a gentleman, she allowed, a young man connected with business—but it had been to escape from his addresses that her child had gone to the country; and Emmy was far too high-minded to keep company with any one of whom her mother did not know.

In his despair, Sir Edward even sought out the shop in which this gentleman in his business hours was to be found, and had an interview with the young man whose appearance in the village had so much alarmed and almost disgusted Walter. No information was to be obtained from him. He declared sullenly that he knew nothing about the girl—yes, he had known her, he did not deny; he had thought more of her than she was worth. Though it was going against all his family, he had stuck

to her for a long time, and would have stuck to her as long as she had stuck to him; but he knew nothing about her now.

‘Is it money, guv’nor; somebody left her a fortune?’ he asked at the end of the interview, with a laugh which disconcerted Sir Edward.

This was almost all he had been able to do, except tramping about the streets wherever he could think his son was likely to go. The poor gentleman increased his knowledge of London in the most wonderful way during these miserable days. He found out all kinds of back streets and alleys, and corners of building such as he had never remarked before, but all with a veil over them, a mist of trouble. London in January is dark enough even when the eyes are not clouded with suffering and anxiety; but, with these added, how miserable were the chill streets, the low skies, the yellow thickness of the atmosphere, the hopeless throngs of unknown men and women, always blank, always unresponsive to those strained and troubled eyes!

Sometimes he thought he saw before him a

slim young figure, moving quickly, as Walter might, through the crowd, and hurried vainly after it, pursuing at a hopeless distance, only to lose it in the ever-changing groups. Sometimes with the corner of his eye he would catch a glimpse of some one disappearing round a corner, plunging into a side street, who might be his boy. Alas! it was always a might-be. No happy chance brought them face to face. Had there been no particular reason for it, they would have met, no doubt, in the simplest way ; but this is one of the cases in which, as daily experience proves, those who seek do not find. And when Sir Edward returned home after a day so spent, the gloom he brought with him was like a London fog descending bodily upon the country. Probably there had been a little deadening of trouble in the physical exertion and gloomy expectation of these expeditions ; but he brought an embodied darkness and desolation home.

On one of the days of his absence Ally was acting as a sort of sentinel in the garden : that is, she was taking a walk, as they said, but with

an eye always upon the road and the gate—when her anxious mind was distracted by a sound of approaching wheels, coming, not down the hill, but along the river bank. It was a grey day, damp and soft, with no wind; one of those days which are not unusual in the valley of the Thames; not cold, save for the chill of the damp; very still; the river winding round the Hook in a pale and glistening link; the sky about the same colour, which was no colour at all, the leafless trees rising black as if photographed upon the grey. The river was lower than usual at this season, though it still flowed with a cruel motion round that little promontory as if meaning to make that bit of vantage ground its own some day.

Ally was very sad and quiet, walking up and down, feeling as if life had come altogether to a standstill save for that one thing; nothing else happening; nothing else seeming very likely to happen. That furtive little current which had seemed for a moment to rise in her own life had died away. It seemed a long time since those days when young Rochford had come so often to

Penton Hook. Perhaps his desire to come often had something to do with the delay which had so changed the face of affairs. This had occurred to Ally more than once, and had given her a secret feeling that it was perhaps her fault, but she had not felt able to regret it.

But now all that was over, and Mr. Rochford came no longer. There was nothing for him to come about; and Ally remembered, with a sort of half pang, half shame, the reception which had been given to his mother and sister when they called, and the curious sense of mingled superiority and inferiority which had overwhelmed her in their presence. They were far better acquainted with the world than she was; they were 'in society,' or, at least, had that air of it which imposes upon simple people; but she was Miss Penton of Penton. She had felt then a great though always half-ashamed pleasure in remembering that elevation: but she had not the same sensations now. She felt that she was a snob (if a girl can be called a snob). She was ungrateful, for they had been very kind to her, and mean and petty, and everything that is most

contemptible—feeling herself, only because of Penton (in which there was no merit) somehow exalted above them, the solicitor's mother and sister.

Many times since she had blushed at that incident, and sometimes at the most inappropriate moments; when she woke up in the middle of the night a flush would go over her from head to foot, thinking of what a poor creature, what a miserable little snob she was; a girl-snob, far worse than any other kind; worse than anything Mr. Thackeray had put in his book. Ally, like most people of her age, thought she did not like Mr. Thackeray, who seemed to her to make everybody look as if they had bad motives; but even he, so crushing as he was to a little girl's optimism, had not gone so far in his cynical views as to think of a snob who was a girl. Perhaps she was wrong here, putting limits which did not exist to the great humourist's imagination, but that was what she believed. And she was that girl-snob, which was a thing too bad to be conceived by fancy. She had repented this, and she had felt, though vaguely

in the rush of other experiences, the blank that had fallen upon that opening chapter in which there had once seemed so much to come, but which had, to all appearance, ended all at once without anything coming of it. This chilled her gentle soul, she could scarcely tell why.

How wretched that ball at Penton would have been to her, what a painful blight upon her girlish fancies, if it had not been for these kind people, if it had not been for *him*. Yes; that was the chief point after all, though she was ashamed to admit it to herself. It had been a pleasant break upon the monotony of life when *he* paid these frequent visits, when he talked in that suggestive way, making her think of things which he did not mention, raising a soft commotion which she did not understand in her simple being. It had been like a chill to her to perceive that all this was over. It was all over and done with, apparently; it had all dropped like the falling of a curtain over a drama just begun. She had wanted to know how it would all end, what its progress would be, the scenes that would follow :

and lo, no scenes had followed at all, the curtain had come down.

How wicked and wrong, how horrid it was to think of it at all in the midst of the great calamity that had fallen on the family, to wish even that mother might forget poor Wat for an hour, and go and call, and so make up for the coldness of Mrs. Rochford's reception ! This was a thing, however, which Ally had never suggested, which she thought it dreadful to have even thought of in the present trouble. She defended herself to herself by saying that she had not thought it—it had only flashed across her mind without any will of hers, which is a very different thing, as everybody knows.

And was it possible while she wandered up and down, always with her attention fixed on the gate, always looking for news, for her father's return, for a telegraph boy, for—oh, if that might be ! for Walter himself ; was it possible that some feeling about this other matter intruded into her mind and shared the thoughts which should have been all devoted to her brother ? Ally trembled a little, but could

not blame herself, for she did nothing of the kind with her own will. She only felt a little chill, a little blank, a wonder how that story, if it had gone on, if the curtain had not fallen so abruptly, might have ended. It would have been interesting to know; a broken-off story is tantalising, distressful—the world becomes duller when it breaks off and you never know the end.

Perhaps this had floated across her mind dimly, not interfering with the watch she was keeping, when suddenly the wheels which had been rolling along, not disturbing her attention—for they did not come in the direction whence news could be expected—startled her by suddenly stopping outside the gate. Who could it be? Her heart began to beat. She made a few steps quickly towards the gate. It could not be her father; could it be Walter bringing back his bride? What could it be?

But here suddenly her heart gave another bewildering spring. She felt her breath taken away altogether. The vehicle had stopped outside; and it was young Rochford, in all the

gloss of his usual trim appearance, with the usual flower in his coat, who came forward, quickening his steps as he saw her. He did not look quite as he used to look. There was a little doubt about him, as though he did not know how he was to be received—a little pride, as of a man who would draw back at once if he were discouraged.

Ally could not help making a few steps farther to meet him. She was glad to meet him—oh, there was no doubt of that!—and not only so, but to feel the curtain slowly drawing up again, the story beginning once more, gave everything around a different aspect. She said, ‘Oh, Mr. Rochford!’ with a voice that had welcome in it as well as surprise.

‘I have come about some business,’ he said; but his eyes had already asked several questions, and seemed to derive a certain satisfaction from the unspoken replies. He added, lowering his voice, ‘I have been on the point of coming almost every day—but I felt as if perhaps—I might not be welcome.’

‘Why?’ said Ally, with an astonished look,

which had no guilt in it ; for, indeed, it was not to him, but to his mother and sister, that she had felt herself to behave like a snob.

‘I scarcely know,’ he said. ‘I thought Sir Edward might feel perhaps that my delay—: but I always half felt, Miss Penton, that you—would be rather pleased with the delay: you and your brother.’

‘Yes,’ she said, with a little shiver at Walter’s name ; ‘it was wrong, perhaps, to go against my father; but I think perhaps we were glad—a little.’

‘That has been a consolation ; and then—But I must not trouble you with all my reasons for staying away, when most likely you never observed that I was staying away at all.’

Ally made no reply to this speech, which was so full of meaning. It was, indeed, so full of evident meaning that it put her on her guard.

‘My father is in town,’ she said, ‘if it is business ; but perhaps mother—’

‘I am too glad,’ he said, ‘to meet you first, even for the business’ sake.’

Ally looked up at him with wondering eyes.

What she could have to do with business of any kind, what light he could expect her to throw on any such subject, she could not understand. But there was something soothing, something pleasant, in thus strolling along the path by the flowing river with him by her side. She forgot a little the watch she had been keeping upon the gate. She recollected that he had once told her his dream about a flood, and coming in a boat to her window, but that she would not take advantage of the boat herself, only kept handing out the children to him one by one. How could he divine that she would do that? for of course that was exactly what she would do, if such a risk could ever happen, and if he should come to rescue her as in his dream.

Somehow he led her without any apparent compulsion, yet by a persistent impulse, a little way out of sight of the house, behind a tuft of shrubbery. The big laurels stood up in their glistening greenness and shut out the pair from the windows of the Hook. They were close to the grey swirl of the river running still and swift almost on a level with the bank, when he said

to her suddenly, with his eyes fixed on her face,
‘I want to ask you something about your—
brother.’

‘My brother!’ cried Ally. There was a sudden wild flushing up of colour which she felt to the roots of her hair, and then a chill fell upon her, and paleness. He was watching her closely, and, though she was not aware of it, she had answered his question. ‘My brother,’ she repeated, faltering, ‘Wat? he—he is not at home.’

‘Miss Penton,’ said Rochford, ‘do you think you could trust me?’

‘Trust you!’ said Ally, her voice growing fainter: and then a great panic came over her. ‘Oh! Mr. Rochford,’ she cried, ‘if anything has happened to Wat, tell me, tell me! It is the not knowing that is so dreadful to bear.’

‘I hope nothing has happened to him,’ he said, very gravely. ‘It is only that I have had a letter from him, and I thought that perhaps your father had better know.’

‘Come in and see mother,’ said Ally, breathless. ‘Oh, yes, yes, we had better know, what—

ever it is. Mr. Rochford, oh, I hope he is not ill. I hope nothing has happened.'

'I cannot tell; he has written to me for money.'

'For money!' she cried, the expectation in her face suddenly dropping into a blank of astonishment and almost disappointment. 'Was that all?' was the question written on Ally's face.

'You don't think that means much? but I fear that means a great deal: he is living in London, and he is very young. You must not think me intrusive or meddling: it is that I am afraid of. Sir Edward might suppose, Miss Penton—your mother might think—it is a difficult thing for a man to do. I thought that you, perhaps, if I could see you, might have a little confidence in me.'

Ally did not know how it was that a sense of sweetness and consolation should thus shed itself through her heart; it was momentary, for she had no time to think of herself, but it made everything so much more easy to her. She put out her hand involuntarily with a sudden sense

that to have confidence in him was the most natural thing.

‘Oh, yes,’ she said, ‘tell me, I have confidence. I am sure you would do nothing but what was kind ; tell me, oh, tell me !’

He took her hand ; he had a right to do it, for she had offered it to him.

‘Will you try to follow me and understand ?’ he said. ‘It is business ; it may be difficult for you, but Sir Edward will see the importance of it.’

And then he told her, Ally bending all her unused faculties to the work of understanding, how Walter had gone to him before he left home at all to get money, and how he had heard from him again, twice over, asking for more. Ally listened with horror growing in her heart, but perhaps the young man, though he was very sympathetic, was scarcely so sorry as he looked : and perhaps to seek her out and tell her this story was not what a man of higher delicacy would have done. But then Rochford’s desire to be of use to Walter was largely intermingled with his desire to recommend himself

to Walter's sister. He would have done it anyhow out of pity for the boy and his parents, but to secure for himself a confidential interview with Ally, and to have this as a secret between them, and her as his ambassador and elucidator to her parents, was what he could not deny himself. He was sorry for Walter, who was most likely spoiling his boyish life, and whom it would be right to call back and restrain: but yet he was almost glad of the occasion which brought him so near the girl whom he loved. She on her part listened to him with excitement, with relief, with the horror of ignorance, with an underlying consciousness that all must now come right.

‘If Sir Edward will let me I will go,’ Rochford said. ‘I shall be able to get hold of him perhaps easier than anyone who has authority.’

‘Oh, how kind you are,’ said Ally.

‘Kind! I would lie down and let him walk over me to please you,’ the young man murmured, as if it were to himself.

It was partly to escape from the embarrass-

ment of such murmurs, though they were sweet enough, and partly to escape from the curious process which was turning her trouble into a semblance of happiness against her will, and without any consent of hers, that Ally insisted at last on carrying this information to her mother.

‘How could she think you intrusive when you bring her news of Wat?’ cried the girl, betraying all the anxiety of the family without knowing it; and she hurried him in to where Lady Penton sat in the window, looking out languidly and often laying down her work to gaze. She, too, flushed with anxious interest to hear of Walter’s letter.

And, when Sir Edward came home, he found the lawyer’s dog-cart still at the door, and the young man, surrounded by the three anxious ladies, laying down his plan to them as one who was master of the situation.

‘I will go at once if you will let me; I’ll get hold of him easier than anyone who has a right to find fault,’ young Rochford was saying, when, cold and hungry and discouraged, and

with a smouldering fury against all the world in his heart, Sir Edward pushed the door open and found him there.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE POOR BOY.

WALTER had plunged into London as a diver plunges into the sea. He was in search of but one thing: to find her again who had eluded him, who had drawn him after her by the strongest chains that can draw the imagination at his age, by all the tantalising of vague promises, avoiding fulfilment, of vague engagements which came to nothing, and last of all by this sudden flight, a provocation more audacious than any that went before. Could he ever have expected that she would go with him, to wait all the preliminaries which (as she knew so much better than he did) must precede any possible marriage?

When he came to think of it by the light of the morning, which alters the aspect of so many things, he saw quite plainly that this was not a thing he could have expected of her. She was very daring, he thought, and frank, and secure in her own innocence, but this was not a thing which she could be expected to do. He had been foolishly miserable, disappointed to the bottom of his soul, when he heard that she had gone away. The night he had spent trying to sleep, trying to get through the black hours that made any enterprise impossible, had been terrible to him ; but with the morning there had come a better cheer. Of course, he said to himself ! How could he be so imbecile, so silly, as to think differently. Of course she would not go with him under such circumstances ; and it was delicacy on her part that prevented her from saying so.

There are times when it is a failure of modesty even to suggest that modesty requires certain precautions. Therefore she had not said it. Impossible for her pure lips, for her pure mind, to put into words the idea that he

and she, like any noble knight and maiden, might not have gone together blameless to the end of the world. But she had felt that in the present artificial state of the world it was better not to do this, and she had acted without saying anything, confident that he would understand.

There is no limit to the ingenuity of a lover in framing excuses for the actions of the person beloved. Instead of being blameable, was not this another proof of her perfection, of the sensitive delicacy of all her thoughts, she who was so little bound by conventional laws? The mixture of freedom and of reserve, Walter said to himself, was what he had above all admired and adored in her. It was his own stupidity, not any fault of hers, that had given him so wretched a night, such a sense of desertion and abandonment. He remembered now that he had caught the address of the box which stood half-packed in the room where she had talked to him, in Crockford's cottage. He comprehended everything now. She had taken him there that he should see it, that he should be

able to follow her, without the need of saying a word.

Oh, how well he understood it all! Had they gone together, every circumstance would have been embarrassing; the mere payments to be made, the railway tickets, the cabs, everything would have been awkward. How well (he thought to himself) her fine sense had divined this, perceived it when he saw nothing! That was no doubt the woman's part, to divine what could and could not be done—to settle it all swiftly, silently, without any need of talk, which would have been more embarrassing still.

These thoughts carried him as on fairy wings to the railway-station on the dark and cold morning of his flight from home. He had Rochford's fifty pounds in his pocket, which seemed to his inexperience a fortune, a sum he would never get through, and which was his own, not taken from his father or lessening the means at home, but his, to do what he liked with. With that in his pocket, and the delightful confidence that Emmy had not abandoned him—that, on

the contrary, she had done what was ideally right, the very thing that if he had understood, if he had not been dull beyond example, he would have liked her to do—Walter rushed from his father's house with not too much thought of the wretchedness he was leaving behind. He would not think of that, nor did he feel himself at all constrained to do so. Why should they be miserable? He was old enough to know how to take care of himself. A man did get helpless, almost effeminate, living so much at home; but, after all, he could not be made a fuss over as if he were a lost child. They would understand at least that he could take care of himself.

And then he reflected, with a smile about the corners of his mouth, they would soon know why it was. If at the bottom of his heart there might be a thrill of alarm as to how they would take it, yet on the surface he felt sure that Emmy's beauty and charm would overcome all objections; and then it was not as if he were a boy dependent on his father's bounty. That ten thousand pounds made all the difference!

He had thought at first that it was a mean thing to suppose that it made any difference or disturbed any of the bonds of duty : but now his mind was changed, and he perceived that a man has his own career to think of, that nature forbids him to be always in a state of subordination to his father—nature, and the consciousness that he has enough of his own to live upon without troubling his father.

Yes, it made a difference, not only on the surface, but fundamentally, a difference which was real ; and then the present matter was not one of a day. It concerned, he said to himself, with tremendous gravity, the happiness of his life. How could a little anxiety on the part of his parents, a little quite groundless anxiety, be compared to that ? Even to be brutal, he said to himself, as he must live longer than they could, his happiness was of the most importance, even if it should affect permanently their peace of mind ; and it was only for a time, a few weeks, a few days. What comparison was there ? Even father himself, who was a just man, would see and acknowledge this. And as

for his mother—oh, mother would forgive! That was easily settled. She might be unhappy for a moment, but she would rather be unhappy than condemn him to lifelong misery. That he was very sure of; if the choice were given, she would accept that which was best for him. Thus Walter completely vindicated to himself what he was doing; and before he got to the railway, which was a long way off, and gave time for all these elaborations of thought, he was convinced that what he was doing was what, on the whole, if they knew all the circumstances, they would like him to do.

An ordeal which he had not calculated upon met him when he reached London. The address which he had seen on Emmy's box was in an out-of-the-way and poor place, though Walter, knowing nothing of town, did not know how much out of the way it was. He left his bag at a hotel, and then he went on in a hansom through miles and miles of squalid streets, until at length he reached the goal of his hopes. The goal of his hopes! Was it so?

As he stood at the poor little narrow door, the

ideas with which he had contemplated Crockford's cottage came into his mind. He had persuaded himself into thinking that Crockford's cottage was in its way as venerable as Penton ; but this No. 37, Albert Terrace, what was there to be said for it ? He could not restrain a little shudder, nor could he, when he was shown into the little parlour on the ground-floor, look round him without a gasp of dismay. The only consolation he could get out of it was that he could take Emmy away, that this was indeed his object here, to take her away, to separate her from everything that was squalid and miserable, to surround her with the graces and luxuries of a very different kind of life.

But even the aspect of the house, and of the little parlour, which was full of dirty finery and hung round with photographs and coloured pictures of a woman in various theatrical dresses, with whom he never associated the object of his affections, was nothing to the shock which Walter sustained when the door opened and the original of these portraits presented herself, a large faded woman, very

carelessly dressed, and with the smile which was beaming around him from all the walls, the stereotyped smile of the stage, upon her face. To realise, as he did by-and-by, that this was *her mother*, to feel that she had a right to ask him questions, and consider him with a judicial air, as one who had in her greasy hands, which were so disagreeably soft, and felt as if they were pomaded, the thread of his life, gave poor young Wat such a shock as took the words from his lips. He stared at her without knowing what to say to her in a dismay which could find no expression. No, Emmy was not there. Her occupation required that she should live in another part of London. No, she did not know that she could give him her daughter's address—but if he returned in the evening he might perhaps see her.

‘You are Mr. Penton? Oh, yes, she has spoken of you. She feared that perhaps you would take this step. But, Mr. Penton, my daughter is a girl of the highest principle. She can see you only under her mother's roof.’

‘I wish nothing else!’ cried poor Wat. ‘I—I am ready to do whatever she pleases. She knows I am ready—she knows——’

‘Yes,’ said the mother, nodding her terrible head, upon which was banded and braided and plaited more hair than ever grew, and smiling her terrible smile, and putting forth that odious hand to give a little confidential pressure to his. ‘I also know a great deal, Mr. Penton. I have heard about you—your chivalry and your magnificent position, and your many, many qualities. But, as you know, a mother’s duty is to guard her child. I know the snares of life better than she; I have trodden the thorny way before her, young gentleman. I have myself experienced much which—I would save her from,’ added the woman, with the imposing gesture of a *mère noble*, turning away her head and extending her hand as if to hold the gay deceiver at a distance.

He was the wolf at the gate of the sheepfold, it appeared. Alas, poor Wat! he did not recognise himself from that point of view. Was not he more like the poor strayed lamb, straying in

ignorantly into the midst of the slayers? He was glad to get away, to bring this alarming, unexpected interview to an end: all the more that it had begun to be apparent to him, in a way that made his heart sick, that in the face of this woman, with all its traces of paint and powder, and in the little gestures and tricks of tone and movement, there were resemblances, frightful resemblances, suggestive of his Emmy; that it was possible she might some day—oh, horrible thought!—be like her mother. But no, he cried to himself, the marks which her profession had left—the lines under her eyes, the yellow stains of the rouge, the unwholesome softness of her pomaded hands—from all those he had come to deliver Emmy; these artificial evils never need to be hers. She should smile upon people who loved her, not upon the horrible public staring at her and her beauty.

As he turned away from the place, he even said to himself that this poor woman was not to blame for all those blemishes of self-decoration. It had been her trade; she had been compelled to do it. Who had any right to

blame her? These might be as honourable scars as those which a soldier gets in battle. Perhaps she had to do it to get bread for herself and her child—to bring up Emmy and make her what he knew her. If that should be so, were not the traces of what she had gone through, of what she had had to bear, to be respected, venerated even, like any other marks of painful toil? He made these representations hotly to himself, but he did not find that any ingenuity of thought delivered him from that horror and repulsion. To see the rouge and the powder on the face of a young woman still playing her part was one thing; to mark the traces of them on the vulgarised and faded countenance of one whose day was over was quite another. It was unjust, but it was natural. And this was Emmy's mother, and Emmy was like her. Oh, that such a thing should be!

After this came the strangest episode that could occur in a young man's life. He was afloat on London, on that sea of pleasure and misery, amid all the perils and temptations that made the hearts of those who loved him sink

within them. Even little Mab, with her little stock of worldly knowledge, who thought he would return home when he 'tired,' or when his money was done, could form no other idea of the prodigal than that he was living in pleasure. He was amusing himself, Rochford thought, not without a half sympathy in the break-out of the home boy. As for his father and mother, unutterable terrors were in their minds, fears of they knew not what—of vice and depravity, evil associates, evil habits, the things that kill both body and soul.

But Walter's present life was a life more tedious than all the monotony of home. It had its bright moments, when he was with Emmy, who sometimes permitted him to take her to the play, sometimes to walk with her through the bright-lighted streets, sometimes even on Saturday afternoons or Sunday to take her to the country. It was only on these days that he saw her in daylight at all. She said, laughingly, that her occupation forbade it at other times, but she would not tell him what that occupation was.

When they went to Richmond or Greenwich, or to a little box in one or other of the theatres, where they could sit half-hidden by the curtains, and carry on their own little drama, which was more interesting than anything on the stage, Walter was in a strange elysium, in which the atmosphere was charged with painful elements, yet was more sweet than anything else in life. He made a hundred discoveries in her, sometimes sweet, sometimes—different. It made no alteration in his sentiment when they happened to be discoveries that wounded—sometimes even that shocked him. He was hurt, his sensitive nature felt the shock as if it had been a wound; but it did not affect his love. That love even changed a little—it became protecting, forgiving, sometimes remonstrating; he longed that she should be his, that he might put all that right, mould her to a more exquisite model, smooth away the points that jarred.

Already he had begun to hint this and that to her, to persuade her to one little alteration and another. To speak more softly—she had spoken softly enough at Crockford's, it was only the

spirit of the street that had got into her blood—to move more gently, to know that some of the things she said were dreadful things—things that should not come from such lips. He had not perceived any of these things while she was at Crockford's; he perceived them now, but they did not affect his love, they only penetrated that golden web with threads of shadow, with lines of pain, and smote his heart with keen arrows of anguish and regret—regret not that he had given his life and love to her, but only that she was less perfect than he had thought—that, instead of looking up to her always, and shaping his harsher being (as he had thought) upon her sweetness, it must be his first to shape and pare these excrescences away.

But, besides these glimpses of a paradise which had many features of purgatory, Walter had nothing at all to counterbalance the havoc he was making in his existence. He did not know what to do with himself in London. He rose late, having no occupation for the morning; he wandered about the streets; he ate the late breakfast and dinner, which were now all

the meals he had time for, spinning out these repasts as long as possible. It was a wonder that he never met his father, who was straying about the streets in search of him ; but Walter's streets were not those which his father frequented. He acquired, or rather both acquired, a great knowledge of town in these perambulations ; but not of the same kind. And then he would go to his occupation, the only tangible thing in his life, the meeting with Emmy.

She was sadly shiftY and uncertain even in these scraps of her time, which were all she would or could give him. She was not sure that she wanted to marry him at all. She was quite sure that she would only be married by special licence at four in the afternoon, which was all the fashion now. But no ; he was not to take that oath and make himself unhappy about her. He should not be obliged to swear. She would be married by banns—that was the fashion too. She knew all about what had to be done—everything that was necessary—but she would not tell him. She laughed and eluded him as before. Then she said, Why

should they marry? they were very well as they were.

‘You are very good to me at present,’ she said; ‘you think I must have a box whenever we go to the theatre, and a bouquet, and everything that is nice; but after we are married you will not be so kind.’

When Walter protested that neither marriage nor anything else could diminish his devotion, she shook her head, and said that they would not be able to afford it.

‘You can’t have so much as five hundred a year,’ she said; ‘most likely not more than four—and what would that be in London!’

‘But we need not live in London,’ he said; ‘my father would give us the Hook.’

Emmy threw up her arms with a scream.

‘Should you like to murder me?’ she cried.

It hurt the poor boy that she should have this opinion of his home—the home in which he had been born; and he listened with deep depression to the satirical description of it she began to make.

‘We ought to be ducks to live in the damp

like that. I've never been used to dabble in the water, and it would be my death—I know it would be my death. But we might let it, you know, and that would give us a little more money, say two hundred a year more—do you think it would bring two hundred a year?’

‘Don’t talk of such things!’ cried the young man; ‘it is not for you to be troubled about that.’

‘And for whom is it, then?’ she cried, ‘for you know no more than a baby; and I believe you think we are to live like the birds on worms and seeds, and anything else that turns up.’

Walter had never left her with so heavy a heart as on this evening. He was entirely cast down by her hesitations, her doubts, the contempt with which she spoke of the fortune which he had thought magnificent in his ignorance, and the home which he loved. He went back to his hotel with a heavy heart. He had given up everything for her—all the other objects that made life of importance. He had put himself

altogether at her disposal, and lived but for the moments of their meeting. What was he to do if she despised him—if she cast him off? A faint sense of the pitiful part he had to play began vaguely to awaken in his mind, not moving him to the length of rebellion, nor even to the exercise of his critical faculties, only to misery and a chill suspicion that, instead of sharing the fervour of his feelings, she was weighing him in terrible scales of judgment, estimating what he was worth—a process which made Walter's heart sink. For what was he worth?—unless it might happen to be love—in repayment of that which he gave.

And next evening when he went to the house, which he always approached with a shiver, afraid of meeting the mother, relieved when he found his love alone, he suddenly found himself in the presence he dreaded with a shock of alarm and surprise: for Emmy, whose perceptions were keen enough on this point, generally contrived to spare him the meeting which she divined he feared. Mrs. Sam Crockford met him with her sunniest smile. She caressed his

hand with those large, soft, flaccid fingers from which he shrank.

‘She is not in, but I have a message for you, my dear young sir,’ she said.

‘Not in!’ cried Walter, his heart sinking into his boots.

‘She is engaged elsewhere. May I tell you the truth, Mr. Penton? She has confidence in her mother. I am her only protector, for her step-father, though an honest fellow, does not count, being in another walk of life. I am her only protector, young gentleman.’

‘But surely, surely she doesn’t want protection—from me.’

‘Pardon me, my dear Mr. Penton, that is exactly where she wants protection—from you, that is, from her own heart, from her own treacherous, foolish heart. What have you to offer her, that is the question? She has had good offers. There is one at present, hung up, so to speak, because she does not know her own mind.’

‘Let me speak to her,’ said Walter, hoarsely. ‘She cannot intend to desert me after all—after all!’

‘Dear boy!’ cried the woman, pressing his hand once more with hers, ‘how I admire such impetuosity. But you must remember my duty as a mother. You have nothing to settle on her, Mr. Penton. Yes, I understand your ten thousand pounds; but you are not of age. You can’t even make your will or sign the settlements till you are of age. She has very good offers, no one could have better. Shall I tell you,’ said Emmy’s mother, with the most ingenuous and ingratiating of smiles, ‘shall I tell you what I should do if I were you? I would not allow her to sacrifice herself. I would rather, much rather, that the sacrifice was on my side.’

‘Sacrifice!’ he cried, feeling the dreadful little room reel round him.

‘What else can you call it, Mr. Penton? You will not be twenty-one till the autumn, I hear. October, is it? And in the meantime my chyild has to toil. Conceive a creature of her refined and sensitive temperament, young gentleman! a girl not adapted to face the world.’

This confused Walter, who could not but feel

that Emmy was very well qualified to face the world, and to whom she seemed a sort of Una triumphant over it; but he would not reply on this score. All he could say was an impassioned offer if she would only accept—if her mother would but accept—all that he had. What could it matter, when so soon everything he had would be hers?

The mother put away his offer with her large white hand, turning her shoulder to him and half averting her head.

‘Money! I dare not propose it; I dare not suggest it, though it is most generous, most noble on your part,’ she added, turning round suddenly, seizing his hand in both of hers with a soft lingering pressure, which poor Walter could not help feeling left something of the pomade behind. Then she subsided into a more majestic pose. ‘But, dear fellow, what have you?’ she said, with a sort of caressing reflectiveness. It all seemed like a scene in a play to Walter, notwithstanding he himself was one of the actors. ‘What have you?’ she said, with a sort of tender regret. ‘Your agent will

soon tire of making you advances, and every advance diminishes your capital. We are talking of marriage, my dear young gentleman, not of mere amusement and spending your money free, as some young men will do to please a girl they are in love with; but the object of my life has been to bring up my girl respectable, and nothing of that sort is possible.' She waved her hand, dismissing the idea, while Walter stood stupefied, gazing at her. 'It is a question of marriage,' she added, with solemnity: 'and what have you to offer—expectations?' Then she sank her voice to a sort of stage whisper. 'Do you know that your father is after you, young sir? He has been here.'

'Here!' said the boy, in sudden alarm and dismay.

She nodded her head slowly and solemnly.

'Here. I need not say I gave him no information: but if you rely upon him to receive and support you, as my child has told me— Young Mr. Penton, Emmy must not be exposed to an angry father's wrath.'

'My father here!'

He looked round him, at the room, at the woman, at all these dreadful accessories, with a sinking heart. He seemed to see them all through his father's eyes, who had never seen Emmy, and to himself they were terrible enough with all the charm that she exercised.

‘No,’ she said, raising her arm. ‘I cannot have her exposed to an angry father's wrath. Mr. Penton, this suit of yours must come to an end.’

‘I must see Emmy,’ he cried, with confused misery. ‘I must see Emmy; don't, don't, for pity's sake, say any more. It is she who must decide.’

‘Pardon me; she takes her own way in small matters, but in this a mother is the best judge. Mr. Penton, she must not be exposed to an angry——’

‘I must see Emmy, I must see Emmy,’ cried poor Walter. He was capable of no other thought.

CHAPTER IX.

A MORE CHEERFUL VIEW.

SIR EDWARD, with more than the usual irritation in his countenance, contemplated the new member of the family council. He had come in with a great deal to say, and the sight of Mr. Rochford was like a sudden check, unlooked for, and most unwelcome. He had, indeed, begun to speak, throwing himself into a chair. ‘I’ve got my trouble for my pains—’ when he perceived that the weariness, the contrariety, the trouble in his face had been betrayed to a stranger. He pulled himself up with a sudden effort.

‘Ah, Rochford,’ he said, with an attempt at a smiling welcome, which was as much out of his usual habits as of his present state of mind.

‘Edward,’ said his wife, ‘Mr. Rochford has heard from Walter. He came to bring us the letter; he has some information, and he knows, oh, more than any of us—from the first.’

‘What is it he knows?’ cried the father, exasperated, with a start of energy in defence of his privacy and of his son. He looked with his angry, troubled eyes at the intruder with an angry defiance and contempt. Rochford the solicitor! the man of business, a man whom indeed he could not treat as an inferior, but who had no claim to place himself on the same level as a Penton of Penton. He had not hitherto shown any disposition to stand on his dignity to make the difference between the old level and the new. But that this young fellow should presume to bring information about his son, to thrust in a new and intrusive presence into a family matter, was more than he could bear. ‘I am very glad to consult Mr. Rochford on matters within his range,’ he added, with an angry smile, ‘but this is a little, just a little, out of his sphere.’

‘Edward!’ cried Lady Pemton, and ‘Father!’

cried Ally ; the latter with an indignation and resentment which surprised herself. But to hear him, so kind as he was, put down so, put aside when he wanted nothing but to help, had become suddenly intolerable to Ally. Why should Walter, who was behaving so unkindly, be considered so much above *him*, who had come out of his way to help ? An impulse almost of indignation against Walter filled her mind, and she felt ready to silence her father himself, to demand what he meant. She did not herself comprehend the fervour of new feeling, the opposition, the resentment that filled her heart.

‘ When Sir Edward reads this letter he will understand,’ said the young man, who kept his temper admirably.

He was ready to bear a great deal more than that, having so much at stake. And he, for his part, was quite aware that for a Rochford of Reading to ally himself to the Pentons of Penton was a great matter, and one which might naturally meet with opposition. To have his part taken by Ally was a great matter—he could put up with her father’s scorn for a time.

Sir Edward read the letter, and his serious countenance grew more sombre still.

‘From this it appears that my son has applied to you for money? I am sorry he has done it, but I don’t see that it tells any more. Walter has not made a confidant of you, that I can see. My dear, I don’t mean to be disagreeable to Mr. Rochford: but he must see, anyone might see, that a family matter—a—a consultation among ourselves—a question which has nothing to do with the public——’

‘I am your man of business, Sir Edward,’ said Rochford. ‘My family have known the secrets of yours long before my time. I don’t think we have ever betrayed our trust. Your son has put some information into my hands. I did not think I was justified in keeping it from you, and I think, if you will let me, that I can help you. Intrusion was not what I meant.’

He was the least excited of that tremulous party, and he felt that the object which was before him was well worth a struggle; but at the same time the young man was not without a certain generosity of purpose, a desire to help

these troubled and anxious people. To Ally his attitude was entirely one of generosity and nobleness. He had come in the midst of the darkness to bring the first ray of light, and he was too magnanimous to be disgusted or repulsed by the petulance of her father's distress. If he had a more individual motive it was that of pleasing *her*, and that was no selfish motive, surely. That added—how could it be otherwise?—a charm to all the rest in her dazzled eyes.

‘Mr. Rochford is very kind, Edward,’ said Lady Penton. ‘Why should we not take the help he offers? He is a young man, he understands their ways, not like you and me. The young ones understand each other, just as we understand each other. They haven’t the same way of judging. They don’t think how their fathers and mothers suffer at home. Oh, let him go! it isn’t as if he would talk of it and betray us. Listen to him. He has known of this all the time, and he hasn’t betrayed us. Oh, let him go.’

‘Go! where is he to go?’

‘To find Walter,’ they all cried together.

‘It is killing you,’ said Lady Penton. ‘Let the young man—who doesn’t feel as we do, who doesn’t think of it as we do—let him go, Edward. It seems so dreadful to us, but not to him. He thinks that probably there is nothing dreadful in it at all, that it is a thing that—a thing that—boys do: they are so thoughtless—they do it, meaning no particular harm.’

‘There is something in that,’ said Sir Edward, with relief. ‘I am glad you begin to see it in that way, my dear. It is more silly than wrong—I have thought so all along.’

‘That is what Mr. Rochford says. He is a young man himself. He thinks the boy will never have considered, and that as soon as he thinks, as soon as he finds out—Edward, we mustn’t be tragical about it. I see it now as you say. Stay at home—you have so many things to think of—and let the young man go. They understand each other between themselves,’ Lady Penton said, with a somewhat wan smile.

And then Sir Edward began to relax a little.

‘Rochford is right there,’ he said. ‘It is perhaps a good thing to have a man’s view. You, of course, were always unduly frightened, my dear. As for not writing, that is so common a thing—I could have told you all that. But, naturally, seeing you in such a state has affected me. When you are married,’ he said, turning to Rochford with a faint smile, ‘you will find that though you may think it weak of her, or even silly, the colour of your thoughts will always be affected by your wife’s.’

This speech produced a curious little momentary dramatic scene which had nothing to do with the question in hand. Rochford’s eyes instinctively flashed a glance at Ally, who, though hers were cast down, saw it, and flamed into sudden crimson, the consciousness of which filled her with shame and confusion. Her blush threw a reflection instantaneous, like the flash of a fire, over him, and lighted up his eyes with a glow of delight, to conceal which he too looked down, and answered, with a sort of servile respect,

‘I have no doubt of it whatever, sir ; and it ought to be so.’

‘ Well, perhaps theoretically it ought to be so,’ Sir Edward said, who noticed nothing, and whose observation was not at any time quick enough to note what eyes say to eyes.

Now that it was all explained and settled, and he felt that it was by his wife’s special interposition that Rochford had been taken into favour, there could be no doubt that it was a comfort to have a man, with all the resources of youth and an immediate knowledge of that world which Sir Edward was secretly aware he had almost forgotten, to take counsel with. His spirits rose. His trouble had been greatly intensified by that sensation of helplessness which had grown upon him as he wandered about the London streets, sick at heart, obstinate, hopeless, waiting upon chance, which is so poor a support.

This day he had been more hopeless than ever, feeling his impotence with that sickening sense of being able to do nothing, to think of nothing, which is one of the most miserable of

sensations. It was so far from true that he had taken the colour of his thoughts from his wife, or felt Walter's absence more lightly than she had done, that it was he who had been the pessimist all along, whose imagination and memory had furnished a thousand stories of ruin and the destruction of the most hopeful of young men, and to whom it was almost impossible to communicate any hopefulness. But a partnership of any kind is of great use in such circumstances, and above all the partnership of marriage, in which one can always put the blame upon the other with the advantage of being himself able to believe that the matter really stands so.

Lady Penton did not complain. She was willing enough to bear the blame. Her own heart was much relieved by Rochford's cheerful intimation that Walter's little escapade was the commonest thing in the world, and most probably meant nothing at all. If it might but be so! If it were only his thoughtlessness, the folly of a boy! At least if that could not be believed it was still a good thing and most for-

tunate that people should think so, and the man who suggested it endeared himself to the mother's heart.

And then another and more expansive consultation began. On ordinary occasions Sir Edward allowed himself to be questioned, giving brief answers, sometimes breaking off impatiently, shutting himself up in a troubled silence, from which an unsatisfactory scrap of revelation unwillingly dropped would now and then come. Sometimes he drove them all away from him with the morose irritation of his unsuccess. What did it matter what he had done in town, when it all came to nothing, when it was of no consequence, and brought no result?

But to-day he spoke with a freedom which he had never shown before. Everything was more practical, more possible. The new agent had to be informed of all the facts, upon which perhaps his better knowledge of such matters might throw new light. Sir Edward confessed that he had extracted from old Crockford the address of the girl's mother. 'Though I could not allow—though I mean I feel sure that the boy never

mixed himself up with people of that sort,' he added, with his little air of superiority; then described Mrs. Sam Crockford to them, and her declaration that she knew nothing of the young gentleman.

In his heart of hearts Sir Edward did not believe this any more than Rochford did, but it gave him a countenance, it supported his new theory, the theory so adroitly suggested to him that Walter after all was probably not much to blame. This theory was a greater consolation than can be told to all of them. Not much to blame! Careless only, amusing himself, a thing which most youths of his age did somehow or other.

'Of course,' Rochford said, 'there are some preternatural boys who never tear their pinafores or do anything they ought not to do.'

Thus he conveyed to their minds a suggestion that it was in fact rather spirited and fine of Walter to claim the emancipation which was natural to his kind. The load which was thus lifted from their gentle bosoms is not to be described. Lady Penton indeed knew better,

but yet was so willing to be deceived, so ready to be persuaded! And Sir Edward knew—oh, a great many variations of the theme, better and worse—but yet was willing too to take the young man's word for it, the young man who belonged to Walter's generation and knew what was in the minds of the boys as none of the others could do. He brought comfort to all their hearts, both to those who had experience of life and those who had none, by his bold assumption of an easy knowledge.

‘I have no doubt, if truth were told, he is dying to come home,’ Rochford said, ‘and very tired of all the noise and nonsense that looks so pleasant at a distance. I know how one feels in such circumstances—bored to death, finding idleness and the theatres and all that sort of thing the dreariest routine, and yet ashamed to own it and come back. Oh, he only wants to see a little finger held up to him from home, *I* know!’ said the young fellow, with a laugh. He did himself the greatest injustice, having been all his life of the order of those who have the greatest repugnance to

dirtying their pinafores. But love and policy, and pity as well, inspired him, and his laugh was the greatest comfort in the world to all those aching hearts. He took down Mrs. Sam Crockford's address, and all the information which could be given to him; the very sight of his little note-book inspiring his audience with confidence. 'The thing for me to do,' he said, 'is to take him myself the money he wants. Though the address he gives is only at a post-office, I shall find him out—and perhaps take a day or two's amusement in his company,' he added, with a smile.

'Oh, Mr. Rochford, that would be kindness indeed!' Lady Penton said.

And Ally gave him a look—what did it say? Promises, pledges, a whole world of recompense was in it. He said, with another little laugh of confidence and self-satisfaction, not untouched with emotion,

'Yes, I think that's the best way. I'll get him to take me about, I only a country fellow, and he up to all the ways of town; and it will be strange if we don't get to be on confidential

terms ; and as I feel quite certain he is dying to come home——’

‘Most likely, most likely,’ said Sir Edward.

It was, as Rochford felt, touch and go, very delicate work with Sir Edward. A word too much, a look even, might be enough to remind Walter’s father that he was the head of the house of Penton, and that this was only his man of business. The young lawyer was acute enough to see that, and wise enough to restrain the natural desire to enlarge upon what he could do, which the intoxication of feminine belief which was round him encouraged and called forth. He subdued himself with a self-denial which was very worthy of credit, but which no one gave him any credit for. And by this time the afternoon was spent, darkness coming on, and it was necessary he should go home : he felt this to be expedient in the state of affairs, though it was hard to go without a word from Ally, without a moment of that more intimate consultation, all in the erring brother’s interests, which yet drew these two so much closer together.

‘I will come this way,’ he said, as they all went with him to the door where the dog-cart was standing, ‘to-morrow, on my way to town, to see if there are any last directions—anything you wish to suggest, Sir Edward—anything that may occur to you in the meantime, which I might carry out.’

‘Yes, perhaps that will be well,’ Sir Edward said.

‘To go direct from you will give me so much more influence.’

‘Yes, yes,’ he said, impatiently. It was very delicate work with Sir Edward. ‘Telegraph if I’m wanted. Of course I am ready—whatever is wanted.’

‘And you will let us know at once, oh, at once, Mr. Rochford; you know how anxious, though foolishly, as you all say——’

‘Not foolishly,’ the young man said, pressing Lady Penton’s hand. He was very sorry for her wistful, tremulous looks, though his heart was bounding with satisfaction and elation in his own prospects. ‘Not foolishly,’ he half-whispered, ‘but soon to be over. I think I can

promise you that—I feel sure I can promise you that.’

‘God bless you!’ said Walter’s mother, ‘and reward you, for I can’t—oh, if you bring me back my boy, Mr. Rochford!’

‘I will,’ he cried, but still in a whisper. ‘I will! and you *can* reward me, dear Lady Penton.’

He kissed her hand in his emotion, which is a salutation very unusual in mild English households, and brought a little thrill, a sensation of solemnity, and strangeness, and possibilities unconceived, to her startled consciousness.

Ally could not speak at all. She was half-concealed in her mother’s shadow, clinging to her, still more full of strange sweet excitement and emotion. Her young eyelids seemed to weigh down her eyes. She could not look at him, but his words seemed to murmur in her ears and dwell there, returning over and over again, ‘You can reward me.’ Ally, at least, now, if not before, knew how.

‘You’ve got a good horse there,’ said Sir Edward, mechanically stroking the shining neck

of the impatient animal, 'you'll not be long on the road.'

'No, she goes well; to-morrow then, sir, early.'

'As early as you please—you'll have a cold drive. Thank you, Rochford.'

He put out his hand to the young man with a hasty touch just as Rochford took the reins, and then turned away and shut himself up in his book-room, while the others stood watching the dash of the mare, the sudden awakening of sound in the silence, the glimmer of the lamp as the cart flew along the drive. Sir Edward retired to think it over by his dull afternoon fire, which was not made up till after tea. The night had fallen, but he did not immediately light his candles. He bent down over the dull red glow to think it over. His mind was relieved, there seemed now some possibility that this miserable anxiety might be over. But even though his object may be gained by other means, a man does not like to fail in his own person, and the chill of unsuccess was in his heart.

Rochford, his man of business! well, princes

themselves have to seek help from men of business. It was his trade to find out things. It was in the way of his profession that he should succeed. But then had not his ear caught something about a reward—a reward! what reward? except his charges, of course. A new contrariety came into Sir Edward's mind, though he could not define it. He had not at all an agreeable half-hour as he sat thinking it over in that dull moment before tea, over the dull book-room fire.

CHAPTER X.

A NEW AGENT.

ALLY was up very early next morning. She was always early. In a house with so many little children and so few servants, if you were not up early you were in arrears with your work the whole day. That was her conviction always, but on many occasions, especially on dark winter mornings, it did not carry the same practical force. This day she was more certain of the necessity than ever. She scolded Anne for not sharing it, but so softly that Anne fell asleep in the middle of the little lecture. And Ally knew very well that nothing could be done, that no one could come so very early as

this was. But still her mind was in great agitation, and it did her good to be up and about. About Walter? She had been very unhappy about Walter, full of distress and trouble, her heart beating at every sound, thinking of nothing else.

But to-day she was, to say the least, a little more at ease about her brother. Last night they had all been more at their ease, so much so that Lady Penton had begun to talk a little about the removal, and the new furniture that would be required, and the many expenses and advantages, such as they were, of the new establishment. The expenses were what Lady Penton was most sensible of. For her own part, perhaps the advantages did not seem advantages to her. She was satisfied with the Hook. What did she want with Penton? But, at all events, she had been able to think of all this, to change the one persistent subject which had occupied her mind. And perhaps this was what had set Ally's mind afloat. She was glad to be quite alone to think it all over, notwithstanding that Martha looked at her with no

agreeable glances as she came into the dining-room before the fire was lighted.

‘I just overslep’ myself, Miss Alice,’ said Martha. ‘With helping to wash up downstairs, and helping to get the nursery straight upstairs, a body has no time for sleep.’

‘It does not matter at all, Martha,’ said Ally, with fervour, ‘I only thought I should like to arrange the books a little.’

‘Oh, if that’s all, miss,’ Martha said, graciously accepting the excuse.

But even Martha was a hindrance to Ally’s thoughts. She made herself very busy collecting the picture-books with which the children made up for the want of their usual walks on wet days, and which they were apt to leave about the dining-room, and ranging them all in a row on the shelf while Martha concluded her work. But as soon as she was alone, Ally’s arms dropped by her side and her activity ceased. She had put away her thoughts in Martha’s presence, as she had done in Anne’s and in her mother’s, keeping them all for her own enjoyment; but now that she was alone

she could take them out and look at them. After all, they were not thoughts at all, they were recollections, anticipations, they were a sort of soft intoxication, delirium, a state too sweet to be real, yet which somehow was real—more real than the most commonplace and prosaic things. To be alone, how delightful it was, even with the fire only half alight, and reluctant to begin the work of the day, and Martha's duster still before her.

She leaned her arms on the mantel-piece and bent her head down upon them and shut her eyes. She could see best when she shut her eyes. Had anyone been there, Ally could not thus have shut herself up in that magical world. Her hands were rather blue with cold, if truth must be told, but she was aware of nothing but an atmosphere of warmth and softness, full of golden reflections and a haze of inarticulate happiness. She had forgotten all about that momentary movement of pride, of hesitation, which she had afterwards called by such hard names, but which at the moment had been real enough—that sensation of being Miss Penton of Penton,

in the presence of Mrs. Rochford and her daughter.

Both the sin and the repentance had faded out of Ally's mind. She did not ask herself anything about her suitor, whether he would satisfy her father, whether he would be thought of importance equal to the new claims of the family. Ally had gone beyond this stage, she remembered none of these things. The only external matters which affected her were the facts that for her sake he was going out into the world to bring back her brother, and that the whole horizon round her was the brighter for this enterprise.

Naturally her thoughts gave it a far graver character than it possessed. It seemed something like the work of a knight-errant, an effort of self-sacrifice beautiful and terrible. He was about to leave his home, to plunge into that seething world of London, of which she had heard so many appalling things, for her brother's, nay, for her sake. She thought him as wandering through streets more miserable than any of the bewildering dark forests of romance.

In short, all the anguish of such a search as she had read of in heartrending stories occurred to Ally's mind. And all this he was doing for her. It gave her a pang of delightful suffering more sweet than enjoyment that he should be so good, so brave, and that it should be all for her.

Meantime young Rochford prepared, with a little trouble, it must be said, to absent himself from his business for a few days; he thought that certainly this time must be required for a mission that might not be an easy one; for if he did not know, as he said, that such escapades were the commonest thing in the world amongst young men, he knew very well that to bring back a young culprit was not easily accomplished, and made up his mind that he would want both courage and patience for his task. As a matter of fact, he had no idea of Walter's motive, or of the 'entanglement' which had drawn him away. He was willing enough to believe in an entanglement, but not in one so innocent and blameless; and he believed that the youth had plunged into the abyss with the

curiosity and passion of youth, to feel what was to be felt and what was to be seen, and to make a premature dash at that tree of the knowledge of evil which has so wonderful and bitter a charm. He was ready to take a great deal of trouble for the deliverance of the boy, though not without a little shake of his head at the thought of the other young Pentons who had also taken that plunge, and whom it had not been possible to rescue.

He had heard his father tell how many efforts Sir Walter had made to save his sons, and with how little effect. Did it perhaps run in the blood? But Rochford was fully determined to do his best, and confident, as became a fighter in that good cause, that whoever failed, he at least would succeed. And it was quite possible that he might have been willing to help these poor people (as he called them to himself), and save the unfortunate boy, if he had not loved Ally. He was generously sorry for them all, notwithstanding his consciousness of the enormous advantage likely to spring to himself from what he could do for them.

He would have done it, he thought—if they had asked him, or even if it had come evidently in his way—for them ; and certainly he would have done it for Ally's brother, whosoever that brother might have been, to recommend himself to the girl he loved. There could be no doubt upon that subject. The complication which made it so infinitely useful to him to make himself useful in this way, because the girl he loved was the eldest daughter of Sir Edward Penton, and more or less out of his sphere, was after all a secondary matter—and yet it could not be denied that it was very important too. He said to himself that he would have chosen Ally from the world had she been a poor curate's daughter, a poor governess, a nobody. But at the same time he could not but be aware that to marry Miss Penton was a great thing for him, and worth a great deal of trouble to bring about.

Perhaps a man's feelings in the matter of his love are never so unalloyed as a girl's, to whom the love itself is everything, and with whom the circumstances tell for nothing. Or perhaps

this depends upon the circumstances themselves, since a girl too has many calculations to make and much to take into consideration when she is called upon to advance herself and her family by a fortunate marriage.

Rochford could not help feeling that such a connection would be a fine thing: but it was not for the connection that Ally was dear to him. He thought of her in his way with subdued rapture really stronger and more passionate, though not so engrossing, as her own, as he dashed along the river-side, his mare almost flying, his heart going faster, beating with the hope of a meeting with Ally before he should see her father—before he set off upon his mission. If Ally loved him she would find the means, he thought, to give him that recompense for his devotion; and sure enough, as he came in sight of the gate, he became aware also of a little slim figure gathering the first snowdrops in the shadow of the big laurel bushes that screened the little drive. He flung the reins to his groom and leaped out of the cart, at imminent risk of startling the other nervous, highly organised

animal, who had carried him along so swiftly ; but what did he care for that or any other risk ?

In a moment, shutting the gate behind him gingerly, notwithstanding his headlong haste, that nobody might be aware of his arrival, he was by Ally's side.

‘You are gathering flowers, Miss Penton, already !’

‘Oh, Mr. Rochford, is it you ? Yes ; they are earlier here than anywhere. They are only snowdrops, after all.’

She looked not unlike a snowdrop herself, with a white wrapper wound round her throat, and her head, which drooped a little—but not till after she had recognised him with a rapid glance and an overwhelming momentary blush which left her pale.

‘I could think there would be always flowers wherever you trod,’ he said.

‘That’s poetry,’ she replied, with a little tremulous laugh, in which there was excitement and a little nervous shivering from the cold. ‘It must have been you I heard galloping along,’

she added, hurriedly, 'like the wind. Are you in haste for the train?'

'I was in haste, hoping for a word with you before I started.'

'My father is expecting you, Mr. Rochford.'

'Yes; I did not mean your father. Won't you say a kind word to me before I go?'

'Oh, if I could only thank you as I should like! Mr. Rochford, I do with my whole heart.'

'It is not thanks I want,' he said. 'Ally—don't be angry with me—if I come back—with—your brother.'

'Oh, Mr. Rochford, we will all—I don't know what to say—bless you!'

'I don't want blessing; nor is it the others I am thinking of. Ally, are you angry?'

He had taken in his own her cold hands, with the snowdrops in them, and was bending over them. Ally trembled so that she let her flowers fall, but neither of them paid any attention. He did not say he loved her, or anything of that kind, which perhaps the girl expected; but he said,

‘Ally, are you angry?’ once more.

‘Oh no,’ she said, in a voice that was no more than a whisper: and then the sound of a step upon the gravel made them start asunder.

It was Sir Edward, who had heard the dog-cart coming along the curve by the river, and who, restless in his anxiety, had come forth to see who it was. Both Rochford and Ally stooped down after that little start of separation to pick up the fallen flowers, and then once more their hands touched, and the same whisper, so meaningless yet so full of meaning, was exchanged—

‘If you are not angry, give them to me, Ally!’

Angry? no; why should she be angry? She gave him the snowdrops out of her hand, and while he ran up to meet her father was thankful to have the chance of stooping to gather up the rest. It was not so much, after all, that he had said; nothing but her name—Ally—and ‘Are you angry?’ At what should she be angry?—because he had called her by her name? It had never sounded so sweetly, so soft, in her ears before.

‘Yes, I am on my way to the station. I came to see if you had any instructions for me; if there was any—news, before I go.’

‘I don’t see how there could be any news,’ said Sir Edward, who had relapsed into something of his old irritation. ‘I didn’t expect any news. If he did not write at first, do you think it likely he would write now?’

‘He might do so any day; every day makes it more likely that he should do so,’ said Rochford, ‘in my opinion.’

‘Ah, you think more favourably than I do,’ said the father, shaking his head, but he was mollified by the words. He went on shaking his head. ‘As long as he can get on there, I don’t expect him to write. I don’t expect him to come back. I don’t think you’ll find him ever so easily as you suppose. But still, you can try; I have no objection that you should try.’

‘Then there is nothing more to say beyond what we settled last night?’

‘Nothing that I can think of. His mother, of course, would have messages to send; she

would wish you to tell him that she was anxious, and feared his falling ill, and all that ; but I don't pretend to be unhappy about his health or—anything of that sort,' said Sir Edward, hoarsely, with a wave of his hand. 'You can tell him from me that he'd better come home at once ; we'll be removing presently. He had best be here when we take possession of Penton ; he had best—be here—— But you know very well what to say—that is, if you find him,' he added, with a harsh little laugh, 'which you won't find so easy as you think.'

'I don't suppose it will be easy,' said Rochford ; 'but if it can be done I'll do it. I'll stay till I've done it. I shall not return without some news.'

'Ah, well ; go, go. You are full of confidence, you young men. You think you've but to say "come," and he will come. You'll know better when you are as old—as old as I am. Good-bye, then, if you are going. You'll—look in as you come back ?'

‘I shall come here direct, sir: and telegraph as soon as I have anything to say.’

‘Good-bye, then,’ said Sir Edward, stretching out his hand. He held Rochford for a moment, shaking his hand in a tremulous way. Then he said, ‘It must be inconvenient, leaving all your business, going away on this wild goose-chase.’

‘If it were ever so inconvenient I shouldn’t mind.’

He kept swinging the young man’s hand, with a pressure which seemed every moment as though he would throw it away; then he murmured in his throat, ‘God bless you then!’ and dropped it, and turned back towards the house.

Rochford was left standing once more by the side of Ally, with her hands full of snowdrops, who had followed every word of this little colloquy with rapt attention. The flowers she had given him were carefully enclosed in his left hand; they were a secret between his love and him. He did not unfold them even for her to see.

‘Walk with me to the gate,’ he said, in a voice which was half-entreaty and half-command.

He held out his arm to her, and she took it. The little authority, the air of appropriation, was sweet to her as she thought no flattery could have been.

‘He will be against me,’ said Rochford, holding her hand close, bending over her in the shade of the laurels. ‘And I don’t wonder. But if I come back successful perhaps they will think me worthy of a reward. Ally darling, you thank me for going, when it is all mercenary, for my own interest——’

‘Oh, no, no—no.’

‘It is—to win you. I am not good enough for you, I know that, but I cannot give up this dear hope. Will you stand by me if they refuse?’

She made no reply. How could she make any reply? She held his arm tight, and drooped her head. She had never stood against them in her life. She was aghast at the thought. Everything in life had been plain to her till now.

But her eyes were dazzled with the sudden new light, and the possibility of darkness coming after it. The confusion of betrothal, refusal, delight, dismay, all coming together, bewildered her inexperienced soul.

‘No, no, no,’ she murmured; ‘oh, no; they will never be against us.’

‘No,’ he cried, in subdued tones of triumph; ‘not against *us*, if you will stand by me. Ally! then it is you and I against the world!’

And then there was the glitter and glimmer before her eyes, the impatient mare tossing her nervous head, the wintry sun gleaming in the harness, in the horse’s sleek coat, in the varnish of the dog-cart: and then the sudden rush of sound, and all was gone like a dream. Like a dream—like a sudden phantasmagoria, in which she too had been a vision like the rest, and heard and saw and done and said things inconceivable. To turn back after that on everything that was so familiar and calm, to remember that she must go and put into water the snowdrops, which were already dropping limp in the hand that he had kissed—that she must face them all in the

preoccupation of her thoughts—was almost as wonderful to Ally as this wonderful moment that was past.

‘You and I against the world.’ And those other shorter words that meant so little apparently, ‘Ally—you are not angry?’ kept murmuring and floating about her, making an atmosphere round her.

Would the others hear her when she went in? That fear seized upon Ally as she drew near the door, coming slowly, slowly along the path. They would hear the words, ‘Ally, are you angry?’ but would they know what that meant? she said to herself in her dream as she reached the door. No, no: they might hear them, but they would not understand—that was her secret between her love and her. To think that in such little words, that looked so innocent, everything could be said!

But nobody took any notice of Ally when she went in at last. They were all occupied with their own affairs, and with the one overpowering sentiment which made them insensible to other things. Ally went into the midst of

them with her secret in her eyes like a lamp in a sanctuary, but they never perceived it. She put her snowdrops in water, all but two or three which she took to her room with her, feeling them too sacred even to be worn, even to be left for Anne to see. But where could she put them to keep them secret? She had no secret places to keep anything in, nor had she ever known what it was to have a secret in all her innocent life. How, oh, how was she to keep this?

CHAPTER XI.

ALLY'S SECRET.

AS a matter-of-fact she did not keep it at all.

The others were very anxious, lost in their thoughts, their minds all quivering with anxiety and hope and fear, but still there were moments when the tension relaxed a little. It was very highly strung at first while the excitement of Rochford's departure and of Sir Edward's encounter with him was still in the air, but by degrees this died away, and a sense of increased serenity, of greater hope, released their souls from that bondage. Lady Penton after a long silence began again to talk a little about the new house.

‘I don't know what we can do with these poor

old things in Penton,' she said; 'such a beautiful house as it is, everybody says, and so many pretty things in it: and all we have is so shabby. Ally, you are the only one that has seen it.'

'Yes, mother,' said Ally, waking up as from a dream.

'What do you think, my dear? you ought to be able to tell me. I suppose there is scarcely a room in the house so small as this?'

'I—don't think I paid any attention.'

'No attention!—to a house which was to be our own house.'

'But no one thought then it was to be our own house,' cried Anne, coming to the rescue. 'And you know Ally did not enjoy it, mother.'

'Oh, yes,' cried Ally, suddenly waking up, feeling once more the brightness of pleasure that had come with the sight of *him*; how he had found her neglected, and made a princess of her, a little queen! Was it possible that she could ever have forgotten that?

'Well, not at first,' said Anne; 'you didn't like Cousin Alicia, which I don't wonder at. Mab didn't like her either. Mother, if Mab comes

back and insists on coming to live with us, what shall you do ?

‘I wish you would not be so nonsensical,’ said Lady Penton, with a little vexation, ‘when I was talking of the furniture. Why should Mab——’ she paused a moment struck by a recollection, and then wound up with a sigh and a shake of her head. ‘Why should not Walter have a try?’

The words came back to her mind vaguely, just clear enough to arouse a keener consciousness of the prevailing subject which her mind had put aside for the moment. Ah! poor Wat! poor Wat! how could his mother think of anything while his fate hung in the balance? But then she reflected on the new agent who had been sent out into the world in search of him, a young man who knew the ways of young men. This reflection gave her more comfort than anything. She clung to the idea that young men spoke a language of their own among themselves, and that only they understood each other’s way. She resumed, with another sigh,

‘I don’t suppose we have anything in our possession that is fit to be put into the drawing-room, Ally. I remember it in old days, the very few times I ever was there : but they say it is far more splendid now than it was before. Do you think that chiffonier would do ?’

The chiffonier had been the pride of Lady Penton’s heart. It was inlaid and had a plate-glass back. She looked at it fondly where it stood, not very brilliant in fact, but making the shabby things around look a little more shabby. She had always felt it was thrown away amid these surroundings, and that to see it in a higher and better sphere would be sweet and consolatory ; but Lady Penton was aware that taste had changed greatly since that article was constructed, and that perhaps the decorations of the great drawing-room at Penton might be out of harmony with a *meuble* belonging to another generation, however beautiful it might be in itself.

‘I—don’t know,’ said Ally, looking at the well-known article with her dreamy eyes ;

‘there was nothing like it—I think : I didn’t notice——’

‘You don’t seem to have noticed anything, my dear,’ her mother said.

Oh, if Ally could but say what it was that had been most delightful to her at Penton ! But then she remembered with overpowering shame how she had shrunk from the ladies who had been so good to her ; how she had felt the elation of her new superiority ; how she had been a snob in all the horror of the word. And she was silent, crushed by remorse and confusion. Fortunately Lady Penton’s mind was taken up by other things.

‘I think,’ she said, ‘the chiffonier will do. It is large, too large, for this little room ; it will fill one side of the wall very nicely. And perhaps some of the chairs, if they are newly covered ; but, as for curtains and carpets and all that, everything must be new. It is dreadful to think of the expense. I don’t know how we are ever to meet it. Ally, what sort of carpets are there now ? Oh, no doubt beautiful Persian rugs and that sort of thing—simple Brussels

would not do. Is it a polished floor with rugs, or is it one of those great carpets woven in one piece, or is it—— My dear, what's the matter? There is no need to cry.'

'I—don't remember—it is so stupid of me,' said Ally, with the tears in her eyes.

'You are nervous and upset this morning; but we must try to take a little courage. I have great confidence in Mr. Rochford—oh, great confidence! He is very kind and so trustworthy. You can see that only to look into those nice kind eyes.'

'Oh, mother dear!' cried Ally, flinging her arms about Lady Penton's neck, giving her a sudden kiss. And then the girl slid away, flying upstairs as soon as she was safely out of sight, to cry with happiness in her own room where nobody could see.

'There is something the matter with Ally this morning,' said her mother; 'she is not like herself.'

'She is not at all like herself,' said Anne, with a little pursing up of her lips, as one who should say 'I could an if I would.'

‘What do you think it is, Anne? Do you know of anything?’

‘I don’t know,’ said Anne, ‘but I guess. Mother—I think it’s Mr. Rochford.’

‘Mr. Rochford!’ Lady Penton cried; and then in a moment the whole passed before her like a panorama. How could she have been so dull? It had occurred to her as possible before old Sir Walter’s death, and she had not been displeased. Now things were different; but still—— ‘What will your father say?’ she exclaimed. ‘Oh, I am afraid I have been neglecting Ally thinking of her brother. What will your father say?’

‘If that sort of thing is going to be,’ said Anne, sententiously, ‘do you think anything can stop it, mother? I have always heard that the more you interfere the stronger it becomes. It has to be if it’s going to be.’

Lady Penton did not make any reply to this wisdom, but she was greatly moved. First Walter and then Ally! The children become independent actors in life, choosing their own parts for good, or, alas! perhaps for evil. She stole

upstairs after a little interval and softly opened the door of Ally's room, where the girl was sitting half crying, smiling, lost in the haze of novelty and happiness: her mother looked at her for a moment before she said anything to make her presence known. Ah, yes, it was very clear Ally had escaped; she had gone away from the household in which she was born, the cares and concerns of which had hitherto been all the world to her, into another sphere, a different place, a little universe of her own, peopled but by the two, the beginners of a new world.

Lady Penton stood unseen contemplating the girl's dreamy countenance, so abstracted from all about her with a complication of new and strange emotions. Her little girl! but now separate, having taken the turn that made her life a thing apart from father and mother. The child! who had in a moment become a woman, an individual with her fate and future all her own. The interest of it, the pride of it, in some respects the pity of it, touches every maturer soul at such a sight—but when it is a woman

looking at her own little girl! She came into the room very softly and sat down beside Ally upon the little white bed and put her tender arms about the young creature in her trance; and Ally, with one low cry, 'Mother!' flung herself upon the breast which had always been her shelter. And there was an end of the secret—so far as such a secret can be told. The mother did not want any telling, she understood it all. But, notwithstanding her sympathy for her child, and her agreement in Anne's inspiration and conviction that such a thing *has* to be if it is going to be, she kept reflecting to herself, 'What will her father say?' all the time in her heart.

This was destined to be a day of excitement in many ways. Just before the family meal (which Lady Penton, with a sense of all the changes now surging upwards in their family life, had begun to speak of with a little timidity as 'the children's dinner') one of the Penton carriages came to the door, and Mab burst in, all smiles and delight.

'Am I in time for dinner?' she said. 'Oh,

Lady Penton, you will let me come to dinner? May I send the carriage away and tell them to come back for me? When must they come back for me? Oh, if you only knew how I should like to stay.'

It was very difficult for these kind people to resist the fervour of this petition.

'My dear, of course we are very glad to have you,' Lady Penton said, with a little hesitation.

And Mab plunged into the midst of the children with cries of delight on both sides. Horry possessed himself at once of her hand, and found her a chair close to his own, and even little Molly waved her spoon in the stranger's honour, and changed her little song to 'Mady, Mady,' instead of the 'Fader, fader!' which was the sweetest of dinner-bells to Sir Edward's ears.

When dinner was over, Mab got Lady Penton into a corner and poured forth her petition.

'Oh, may I come and stay! Uncle Russell is going away, and Aunt Alicia is not at all fond of me. She would not like it if I went with them, and where can I go? My relations are none of them so nice as you. You took me in

out of kindness when I didn't know where to go. I have a lot of money, Lady Penton, they say, but I am a poor little orphan girl all the same.'

'Oh, my dear,' said Lady Penton, 'nobody could be more sorry than I am; and a lot of money does not do very much good to a little girl who is alone. But, Mab, I have so many to think of: and we have not a lot of money, and we have to live accordingly. Though Sir Edward has Penton now, that does not make things better, it rather makes them worse. Even in Penton we shall live very simply, perhaps poorly. We cannot give you society and pleasures like your other friends.'

'But I don't want society and pleasure. Pleasure! I should like to take care of Molly, and make her things and teach her her letters. I should; she is the dearest little darling that ever was. I should like to run about with the boys. Horry and I are great friends, oh, great friends, Lady Penton. At Penton you will have hundreds of rooms; you can't say it is not big enough. Oh, let me come! Oh, let me come!

And then my money——’ But here Mab judiciously stopped, seeing no room for any consideration about her money. ‘You wouldn’t turn me from the door if I was a beggar, a little orphan,’ she cried.

‘Oh, my dear! No, indeed, I hope not; but this is very different. Mab, though I am not much set upon money (but I am afraid I am too, for nothing will go without it), yet a rich girl is very different from a poor girl. You know that as well as I.’

‘The poor girl is much better off,’ cried Mab, ‘for people are kind to her; they take her in, they let her stay, they are always contriving to make her feel at home; but the wretched little rich one is put to the door. People say, “Oh, we are always glad to see you:” but they are not, Lady Penton! They think, here she comes with her money. As if I cared about my money! Take me for Molly’s nurse or her governess. Ally will be going and marrying——’

‘What do you know about that?’ Lady Penton said, grasping her arm.

‘I! I don’t know anything about it; but of

course she will, and so will Anne; and it might happen that you would be glad to have me, just to look after the children a little after the weddings were over, and help you with Molly. Oh, you might, Lady Penton, it is quite possible; and then you would find out that I am not a little good-for-nothing. I believe I am really clever with children,' Mab cried, flinging herself down on her knees, putting her arms about Lady Penton's waist. 'Oh, say that I may stay.'

When she had thus flung herself upon Lady Penton's lap, Mab suddenly raised her round rosy cheek to the pale one that bent over her. They were by themselves in a corner of the drawing-room, and nobody was near. She said in a whisper, close to the other's ear,

'I saw Mr. Penton in town yesterday. He was looking quite well, but sad. I was—oh, very impertinent, Lady Penton. Forgive me. I stopped the carriage, though I am sure he did not want to speak to me. I told him that you were not—quite well—that you were so pale—and that everybody missed him so. Don't

be angry ! I was very impertinent, Lady Penton. And he said he was going home directly—directly, that was what he said. I said you would be sure not to tell him in your letters that you were feeling ill, but that you were. And so you are, Lady Penton ; you are so pale. But he is coming directly, that was what he said.'

'Oh, my little Mab!' Lady Penton cried. She gave the little girl a sudden kiss, then put her hands with a soft resoluteness upon Mab's arms and loosed their clasp. It was as if the girl had pushed open for a moment a door which closed upon her again the next. 'Yes,' she said, 'my son is coming home. He has stayed a little longer than we expected, but you should not have tried to frighten him about his mother. I am not ill. If he comes rushing back before his business is done, because you have frightened him about me, what shall we do to you, you little prophet of evil?' She stooped again and kissed the girl, giving her a smile as well. But then she rose from her seat. 'As soon as we get in to Penton, you must come and pay us a long visit,' she said.

And this made an end of Mab's attempt to interfere in the affairs of the family of which she was so anxious to become a member. She went away to the children with her head hanging, and in a somewhat disconsolate condition. But, being seized upon by Horry, who had a great manufacture of boats on hand, and wanted some one to make the sails for him, soon forgot, or seemed to forget, the trouble, and became herself again.

‘I am coming to live with you when you go to Penton,’ she said.

‘Hurrah! Mab is coming to live with us!’ shouted the little boys, and soon this great piece of news ran over the house.

‘Mad’s tumming! Mad’s tumming!’ little Molly joined in with her little song.

And this new proposal, which was so strange and unlikely, and which the elder members looked upon so dubiously, was carried by acclamation by the little crowd, so to speak, of the irresponsible populace—the children of the house.

The day had been an exhausting day. When

the winter afternoon fell there was throughout the house more than usual of that depressed and despondent feeling which is natural to the hour and the season. Even Mab's going contributed to this sensation. The hopefulness of the morning, when all had felt that the sending out of the new agent meant deliverance from their anxiety, had by this time begun to sink into the dreary waiting to which no definite period is put, and which may go on, so far as anyone knows, day after day.

Sir Edward had withdrawn to the book-room, very sick at heart and profoundly disappointed, disgusted even not to have had a telegram, which he had expected from hour to hour the entire day. Rochford had not found Walter, then, though he was so confident of his superior knowledge. After all, he had sped no better than other people. There was a certain solace in this, but yet a dreary, dreadful disappointment. He sat over his fire, crouching over it with his knees up to his chin, cold with the chill of nervous disquietude and anxiety, listening, as the ladies had done so long—listening

for the click of the gate, for a step on the gravel—for anything that might denote the coming of news, the news which he had never been able to bring himself, but which Rochford had been so sure of sending, only, as it seemed, to fail.

Lady Penton was in the drawing-room. She spent this dull hour often with her husband, but to-day she did not go to him. She could not have been with him and keep Ally's secret, and she was loth to give him the additional irritation of this new fact in the midst of the trouble of the old. She said to herself that if Rochford succeeded in his search, if he sent news, if he brought Walter home, that then everything would be changed; and in gratitude for such a service his suit might be received. She did not wish to expose that suit to an angry objection now. Poor lady! she had more motives than one for this reticence. She would not make Ally unhappy, and she would not permit anything to be said or done that might lessen the energy of the lover who felt his happiness to depend on his success.

It was because of her habit of spending this hour between the lights in the book-room with her husband that she was left alone in the partial dark, before the lamp was brought or the curtains drawn. She had gone close to the window when it was too dark to work at the table, but now her work had dropped on her lap, and she was doing nothing. Doing nothing! with so much to think of, so many, many things to take into consideration. She sat and looked out on the darkening skies, the pale fading of the light, the dull whiteness of the horizon, and the blackness of the trees that rose against it. The afternoon chill was strong upon her heart; she had been disappointed too—she too had been looking for that telegram, and her heart had sunk lower and lower as the night came on. That Walter should be found was what her heart prayed and longed for, and now there was another reason, for Ally's sake that the lover might claim his reward. But the day was nearly over, and, so far as could be told, the lover with all his young energy, was as unsuccessful as Edward himself. So far as this went, their

thoughts were identical, but Lady Penton, if less sad, were more complicated, and took in a closer network of wishes and hopes. She sat at the window and looked out blankly, now and then putting up her hand to dry her eyes. She could cry quietly to herself in the dark, which is a relief a man cannot have.

What a sad house! with heavy anxiety settling down again, and the shadow of the night, in which even the deliverer cannot work, nor telegrams come. There was a spark of warmer life upstairs, where the girls had lit their candle, and where the tremendous secret which had come to Ally was being shyly contemplated by both girls together in wonder of so great and new a thing. And in the nursery there was plenty of cheerfulness and din. But downstairs all was very quiet, the father and mother in different rooms thinking the same thoughts. Lady Penton wept out those few tears very quietly. There was no sound to betray them. It had grown very dark in the room, and her eyes were fixed on the wan light that lingered outside. She had no hope now for a telegram.

He would not send one so late. He must have written instead of telegraphing. He had found nothing, that was clear.

She had said this to herself for the hundredth time, and had added for perhaps the fiftieth that it was time to go and dress, that it was of no use lingering, looking for something that never came, that she had now a double reason to be calm, to have patience, to take courage, when it seemed to her that something, a dark speck, flitted across the pale light outside. This set her heart beating again. Could it be the dispatch after all? She listened, her heart jumping up into her ears. Oh! who was it? Nothing? Was it nothing? There was no sound. Yes, a hurried rustle, a faint stir in the hall. She rose up. Telegraph-boys make a great noise, they send the gravel flying, they beat wild drums upon the door. Now there was nothing, or only a something fluttering across the window, the faintest stir at the open door.

What was it? a hand upon the handle turning it doubtfully, slowly; then it was pushed open.

Oh, no, no; no telegraph-boy. She flew forward with her whole heart in her outstretched hands. Some one stood in the dark, looking in, saying nothing, only half visible, a shadow, no more.

‘ *Wat !* WAT !’ the mother cried.

CHAPTER XII.

THE FINAL BLOW.

WHAT does it matter what a mother says? especially when she is a powdered and pomaded woman like Mrs. Sam Crockford, altogether unable to comprehend, much less interpret, the fair and brilliant creature who is her daughter. How strange that anything so sweet and delightful as Emmy should come from such a woman—one from whom the heart recoiled, who was offensive to every sense, with those white, unwholesome, greasy hands, the powder, the scent, the masses of false hair, the still falser and more dreadful smile.

Walter said to himself as he left her, with that nausea which always overwhelmed him at

the sight of her, that he would not take what she said as having anything to do with Emmy. No ; her existence was a sort of an offence to Emmy ; it might, if that were possible, throw a cloud over her perfection, it might make a superficial admirer pause to think, could she ever in her young beauty come to be like that ? A superficial admirer, Walter said to himself—not, of course, a true lover such as he was, to whom the suggestion was odious and abominable. Like that ! oh, never, never ! for Emmy had soul, she had heart in her loveliness ; never could the actress have resembled her, never could she resemble the actress. He wondered if that woman could be her mother. Such people stole children, they got hold of them in strange ways. Emmy might have been taken in her childhood from some poor mother of a very different kind. She might have strayed away from her home and been found by vagrants—anything rather than believe that she was that woman's daughter, who, to crown all her artificialities, was mercenary too. Or, even if it might really be so, what did it matter ? is there

not often no resemblance between the mother and the child, the mother elderly, faded, meretricious, trying hard to keep up an antiquated display of dreadful charms, seductions that filled the mind with loathing; the daughter, oh, so different, so young and fresh, so full of youth and sweetness and everything that is delightful, everything that is most fascinating.

When he thought of Emmy, the young man's heart, which had been so outraged, grew soft again. If it came to a decision, how very different would Emmy's deliverance be. Yet Emmy had discouraged him too, she had thought of secondary things. She had been sorry that he should lose anything for her sake, he who was so ready to lose all. She had even scoffed a little sweetly at his fortune, the ten thousand pounds, which would not, she declared, be more than four hundred a year. Four hundred a year would be plenty, Walter thought; they could live somewhere quietly in the depths of the country enjoying each other's society, desiring nothing else to make them happy. Would Emmy care for that? she who so loved London.

A number of people loved London so, did not know what to do out of it, people who were the very best, the most highly endowed of all, poets, philosophers—it was no reproach to her that she should be among that number. He was not one of them himself, but then he was, he knew, a dull fellow, a rustic.

Poor Walter went about the streets all day thinking these thoughts. He knew he was not so clever as she was; but yet they had always understood each other: not like that dreadful woman whom nothing could make him understand. He would not accept her decision, whatever she said—he would not believe her even—probably what she had said about his father was untrue; how should his father have got there? No, no, it was not true, any more than it was true that Emmy had permitted her mother to interfere. There was some one else whom the old woman preferred, he said, miserably, to himself, and that was the entire cause of it, not that Emmy meant to cast him off—oh, no, no!

But it was two or three days after this before

he succeeded in seeing her. Either there was a conspiracy on her mother's part, into which she, guileless, fell, or else the mother had acquired an ascendancy over her, and was able to curb the natural instincts, to restrain the sweeter impulses of her daughter. That it could be Emmy's fault he would not allow. He haunted the place morning and evening, and on Saturday afternoon, which had been his moment of bliss.

It was on that day that he met her at last. He met her hurrying out, dressed as she usually was when he was allowed to take her to the country, or to make some expedition with her. She had just stopped to call out something before closing the door about the hour of her return—he thought he heard her say nine o'clock, and it was little past noon. She was going somewhere, then, but not with him. He turned after her as she went lightly along, with the easy skimming step which he had so often compared with every poetic movement under heaven. I filled him with despair to see it now, and to feel that she was going along like this, upon some

other expedition, not in his company, though she must know to what darkness of despondency and solitude she was leaving him.

‘Emmy,’ he cried, hurrying after her. He thought she started a little, but only quickened her pace. She was not, however, to escape him so—that was a vain expectation on her part. He quickened his pace too, and came up to her, close to her, and caught at her elbow in his eagerness and impatience. She turned round upon him with a face very unlike that which had so often smiled upon the foolish boy. She plucked her arm away from his touch.

‘Oh,’ she said, with a tone of annoyance, ‘you here!’

‘Where should I be, Emmy, but where you are? You were going to send for me, to meet me——’

She looked at him with impatience.

‘No,’ she said, ‘I wasn’t going to do anything of the kind; I have got something very different to do.’

‘I have always been ready to do whatever you wanted,’ he said, ‘to go where you pleased,

and you know this has been my reward—this Saturday afternoon, after waiting, waiting, day by day——’

‘Who wanted you to wait? Mr. Penton, that was your doing. You must understand that I’m not going to be made a slave to you.’

‘A slave,’ cried the poor boy, ‘to me!’

‘Well, what is it better? I can’t move a step but you are at my heels. What I’ve always held by is doing what I like and going where I like. I never could put up with bondage and propriety like some people; but you dog my steps, you watch everything I do——’

‘Emmy!’

‘Well! is that all you have to say? Emmy! yes, that’s my name; but you can’t crush me by saying “Emmy!” to me,’ she said, with a little breathless gasp, as of one who had seized the opportunity to work herself up into a fit of calculated impatience. She stopped here, perhaps moved by his pale face, and ended by a little laugh of ridicule. ‘Well, that’s natural enough, don’t you think?’

‘I don’t know what is natural,’ he said. ‘I

have thrown off all that. Emmy, are you going to abandon me after all?

‘After all!—after what? I suppose you mean after all the great things you’ve done for me? What has it been, Mr. Penton? You’ve followed me here, you’ve watched me that I couldn’t take a step or speak a word. No, I am not going with you any more. You must just make up your mind to it, Mr. Walter Penton. I’ve got other things in hand. I’ve other—I’ve—well, let us be vulgar,’ she cried, with a wild little laugh, ‘I’ve got other fish to fry.’

The poor young fellow kept his eyes fixed upon her—eyes large with dismay and trouble.

‘You are not going with me any more! You can’t mean it!—you don’t mean it, Emmy!’

‘But I do. It’s been all nonsense and romance and folly. I didn’t mind just for amusement. But do you think I am going to let you, with next to nothing, and expectations—expectations! what could your expectations be? your father may live for a century! Do you think I am going to let you stand in my way, and keep me from what’s better? No—and no

again, and again. I mean nothing of the sort. I mean what's best for myself. I am not going with you any more.'

'Not going with me!' he said, in a voice of misery; 'then what is to become of me?—what am I to do?'

'Oh, you'll do a hundred things,' she said, tapping him on the arm; 'go home, for one thing, and make your peace. It's far better for you. It's been folly for you as well as me. Go and take care of your ten thousand pounds. Ten thousand pounds! What do you think of as much as that a year? Take care of it, and you'll get a nice little income out of it, just enough for a young man about town. And don't be tyrannized over by your people, and don't let anyone say a word about marrying. You're too young to be married. I'm your only real friend, Walter. Yes, I am. I tell you, don't think of marrying—why should you marry?—but just have your fling and get a little fun while you can. That's my advice to you.'

He walked on with her mechanically, not able to speak, until she got impatient of the silent

figure stalking by her side, struck dumb with youthful passion and misery.

She stopped suddenly and confronted him with hasty determination.

‘You’re not,’ she said, ‘coming another step with me!’

‘Where am I to go? what am I to do? I have lived,’ he cried, ‘only for you!’

‘Then it’s time to stop that!’ she said. ‘Go away—go clean away; it will—it will damage me if you’re seen with me! Now there, that’s the truth! I was so silly as to stop it for your sake before, now I’ve learned better. Mr. Penton, it will be harming me if you come another step. Now, do you understand?’

Did he understand? He stopped, and gazed at her with his blank face.

‘It will be harming you! But you belong to me, you are going to be my wife!’

‘No, no, no!’ she cried; ‘that is all folly; I never meant it. Good-bye, and for heaven’s sake go away, go away!’

She gave an alarmed glance round towards the end of the street. It seemed to Walter that

he too saw something vaguely—a tall spidery outline, a high phaeton, or something of the sort. She broke into a little run suddenly, waving her hand to him.

‘Good-bye!’ she cried; ‘good-bye; go away!’ and left him standing stupefied with wonder, with incredulous conviction, if such words can be put together.

He felt in the depths of his heart that she had abandoned him, but he could not believe it. No, he could not believe it, though he knew it was true. A sort of instinct of chivalry lingered in the poor lad’s heart, wrung and bleeding as it was. He could not harm her, he could not spy on her, he could not interfere with her will, whatever she might do to him. He turned his back upon the spidery tall phaeton. If that was the thing that was to carry her away from him he would not spy, he would not put himself in her way. So long as she did what she liked best! He turned with his heart bleeding, yet half stupefied with trouble, and walked away.

Poor Walter walked and walked all the rest of the afternoon; he did not know where he

went or how, his mind was stupid with suffering. And then came Sunday, when without her the blank was more complete than on any other day. He had not the heart even to seek another interview. On Sunday afternoon he went past the house, and the high phaeton stood at the door. What more could be said? And yet another day or two passed, he did not know how many, before Mab stopped the little brougham in which she was driving and called to him in the street as he went mooning along with his head down in dull and helpless despondency.

‘Mr. Penton! Mr. Penton!’

The little soft voice calling him roused Walter from the stupor of his despair. He knew nobody in town. It was a wonder to him that anyone should know him—should take the trouble to call him. And then Mab’s little fresh face stabbed him with innocent cheerful looks. He was not learned enough to know that these innocent looks knew a great deal, and suspected much more harm than existed, in their precocious society knowledge.

Mab was bent upon doing what she could to bring him back, and she fully realised all the difficulty ; but she looked like a child delighted to see her country acquaintance.

‘And oh, how is Lady Penton?’ she cried.

‘My mother?’ gasped Walter, taken altogether by surprise.

Then Mab told him that little story about Lady Penton’s health.

‘She will of course make light of it when she writes,’ said the artful little girl. ‘But oh, she looks so ill and so pale!’ (‘So she does,’ the little romancer said to herself, in her heart ; ‘it is quite, quite true!’) ‘Oh, Mr. Penton, do make her see the doctor ! do make her take care of herself ! You could do it better than anyone—because you know the others don’t notice the great, great change ; they see her every day.’

‘I will!’ cried poor Wat. ‘Thank you—thank you a thousand times for telling me!’

It gave him a reason for going home, and he did so want a reason, poor boy ! His own wretchedness did not seem cause enough ; and how was he ever to be forgiven for what he had

done? But his mother! He would not wait to think, he would not let himself consider the matter. His mother! And what if she should die! Death had never entered that happy house. It seemed to him the most horrible of all possibilities. He did not even pause to go back to his hotel. Oh, how glad he was of the compulsion, to be thus sent home, to have a reason for going! He went flying, without taking time for thought.

And when Lady Penton threw herself upon him, calling 'Wat, WAT!' with that great outcry, he forgot all about his wrong-doing and his need of pardon. He caught her in his arms and cried,

'Mother, are you ill?—mother, are you better?' as if there were no other trouble or anxiety but this in the world.

'Oh, Wat! oh, Wat!' she cried, unable on her side to think of anything but that he had come back and she had him in her arms again; and for a minute or two no more was said. Then he led her tenderly back to a chair and placed her in it, and knelt down beside her.

‘Mother, you have been ill——’

‘No ; oh no, my dear.’ And then she remembered Mab’s little alarm (dear little Mab ! if it should be her doing). ‘At least,’ she said, ‘my dearest boy, there is nothing the matter with me that the sight of you will not cure.’

‘Oh, mother,’ he cried, ‘that you should have to say that, that I should have been the cause——’

‘Hush, hush,’ she said, pressing him to her ; ‘it is all over, Wat, my own boy. You have come home.’

She asked him no questions, she did not even say that he was forgiven ; and the youth’s heart swelled high.

‘I think I have been mad,’ he said.

But she only replied, kissing him,

‘My own boy, you have come home.’

And what more was there to be said ?

This transport all passed in the dark, with no light in the room except the paleness of twilight in the windows, the dull glow from the fire, which was an ease and softening to the meeting. And then with the lighting of the cheerful

lamps the knowledge spread through the house — Wat has come home.

‘Already!’ cried Ally, with a flush of radiant joy that was more than for her brother.

‘Already,’ Sir Edward said, with a frown that belied the sudden ease of his heart. To say what that relief was is beyond the power of words. The dark book-room, where he sat with his head in his hands and all the world dark round him, suddenly became light. A load was lifted from his shoulders and from his soul; his mind was freed as from chains. But after that first blessed release and relief a sensation of humiliation, almost of resentment, came into his mind. ‘Already,’ he said. He had tramped about London for days and days and found nothing. Rochford had gone and seen and overcome the same day.

‘Edward,’ said Lady Penton, who, though so still, so tremulous after the prodigal’s return, had yet felt the other anxiety spring up as soon as the first was laid, ‘I am sorry for Mr. Rochford. I fear he was making this the foundation for a great many hopes. He

expected to find Walter and bring him home, and thus gain our favour for—something else.’

‘Well,’ said Sir Edward, with his frown, ‘it is astonishing to me how he’s done it. It looks like collusion. I suppose it’s only a piece of luck, a great piece of luck.’

‘He has not done it at all,’ said Lady Penton, ‘Wat has not so much as seen him. He has had nothing to do with it at all.’

The cloud rolled off Sir Edward’s brow: he gave expression to the delightful relief of his mind in a low laugh.

‘I thought,’ he said, ‘nothing would come of it, he was so cock-sure. I thought from the first nothing would come of it: but of course you were all a great deal wiser than I. So he came home of himself when he was tired? Let me see the boy.’

CHAPTER XIII.

NO LONGER COCK-SURE.

ROCHFORD came back in a sadly humbled condition of mind. He was indeed summoned back by a telegram which told him that all was well and his services unnecessary, and returned trailing his arms, so to speak, very much cast down, beginning to say to himself that the Reading solicitor was not at all likely to be considered a fit match for Sir Edward Penton's daughter now that all chance of special service to the family was over. Young idiot! why, after staying away so long, could not he have stayed a little longer? Why not have helped somebody by his folly instead of simply dropping from the skies when it suited him in his egotism and selfishness?

Rochford came back deeply humiliated, deeply despondent. He too had tramped about London one weary and dismal day, and with disgust had recognised that his mission was not so easy as he had supposed. He had gone to the post-office which Walter had given as his address, and had made what inquiries were possible, and then had hung about, hoping that Walter would come to fetch his letter, like those sportsmen who hang about the pools where their big game go to drink. But no one came: and in the morning had arrived that telegram—

‘All well; further search unnecessary. Has returned home.’

Confound him! Why, after making everybody miserable, could he not have stayed another day?

Rochford came home very despondent, taking the blackest view of affairs. If he had but acted with more prudence in the end of the year—if he had but pushed on matters and got that bargain accomplished before Sir Walter had been stricken with his last illness!—then the Pentons, though they would still have had the baronetcy, would

not have been a great county family, and Ally, without fortune to speak of, would have made no *mésalliance* in marrying a man who could keep her in luxury, though he was but the family man of business. But now, though the fortune was scarcely greater, the position was very different. The mother was very artless, but still she knew enough to know that girls so attractive, with the background of Penton behind them, even if they had not a penny, were not to be thrown away on men like himself.

Such was the tenor of his thoughts as he came back. He had expected to return with trumpets sounding and colours flying, bringing back in triumph the wanderer, and having a certain right to his recompense. He came now silent and shamed, an officious person who had offered more than he could perform, who had thrust his services upon those who did not require them. He had not even the courage to see Ally before he went in humbled to her father. It was his duty to tell Sir Edward all that had happened, but he had scarcely a doubt as to

what must follow. He would be sent away, he felt sure ; probably he would not be allowed to speak to her at all—he the man of business, and she the princess royal, the eldest daughter of the house.

But, to his relief as well as surprise, Sir Edward met him with an unclouded countenance. He gave him a warm grasp of the hand. He said,

‘Well, Rochford, all’s well that ends well. You see, it was all settled more easily than you supposed.’

‘You can’t doubt, Sir Edward, that I am most glad it should be so.’

‘Oh, yes, I’m sure you are ; glad—but a little disappointed, eh?—it’s quite natural : you were so cock-sure. That is the worst of you young men. You think we elder ones are all ninnies ; you think we don’t know what we are about. And you are so certain that you sometimes take us in, and we think so too. But you see you are wrong now and then,’ said Sir Edward, with high satisfaction, ‘and it turns out that it is we who are in the right.’

Rochford did not fail to remark to himself in passing, that though he might be wrong he saw very little reason for the assertion that Sir Edward was right. But he was too much cast down for argument. He said,

‘The chief thing is that your anxiety is relieved. I am very glad of that—though I should have liked better to have had a hand in doing it.’ And then he drew himself together as best he could. ‘There is another subject, Sir Edward, that I wished to speak to you about.’

‘Yes, very likely; but you must hear first about Walter. So far as I can make out, it has been a mere escapade, and he has been mercifully saved from committing himself, from—compromising his future. We can’t be thankful enough for that. He comes back free as he went away, and having learned a lesson, I hope, an important lesson. We mean to say nothing about it, Rochford. You’ll not take any notice: I’m sure we can trust in you.’

‘I hope so,’ said the young man; and then he repeated, ‘Sir Edward, there is another subject——’

‘You don’t look,’ said Sir Edward, rubbing his hands with internal satisfaction, ‘so cock-sure about that.’

This was not very discouraging if he had retained sufficient presence of mind to see it. But he was out of heart as well as out of confidence, and everything seemed to him to be of evil augury.

‘No, indeed,’ he said, ‘I am far from being sure. I feel that what I am going to ask will seem to you very presumptuous: and if it were not that my whole heart is in it and all my hopes——’

‘Ah, you use such words lightly, you young men——’

‘I don’t use them lightly. If I could help it I would put off speaking to you. I would try whether it were not possible to find some way of recommending myself—of making you think a little better of me.’

‘If you suppose,’ cried Sir Edward, benignly, ‘that I think less of you because you were not successful about Walter you are quite mistaken, Rochford. You had not time to do anything.

He left town almost as soon as you arrived in it. I never expect impossibilities, even when they are promised,' he added, with a nod of his head.

'It is I that am looking for impossibilities, Sir Edward. I can't think how I could have been so bold. I have been letting myself think that perhaps—that if you could be got to take it into consideration—that, in short——'

And Mr. Rochford, crimsoning, growing pale, changing from one foot to another, looking all embarrassment and awkwardness, came to a dead stop and could find nothing more to say.

'What is it? You seem to have great difficulty in getting it out. What have I in my power that is so important, and that you are so shy about?'

'I am shy, that is just the word. You will think me—I don't know what you will think me——'

'Get it out, man. I can't tell till I know.'

'Sir Edward,' said Rochford, more and more embarrassed, 'your daughter——'

'Oh, my daughter! Is that how it is?'

It is not to be supposed that a day had elapsed after Walter's return and the relief of mind that followed it without some communication passing between Lady Penton and her husband on the second of the subjects that had excited her so deeply.

'Sir Edward,' said the young man, 'Miss Penton's family and position are of course superior to mine. It all depends on the way these matters are looked upon. Some people would consider this an insuperable obstacle. Some do not attach much importance to it. Ideas have changed so much on this subject. My grandfather, as perhaps you are aware, married a Miss Davenport of Doncaster. But I don't know how you may look on that sort of thing.'

'I don't exactly see the connection,' said Sir Edward; 'your grandfather's marriage was a good while ago.'

'Yes, when prejudices were a great deal stronger than now. Though they exist in some places, I have the strongest reason to believe that among the best people they are no longer

held as they used to be. Eva Milton married a Manchester man that had no education to speak of at all.'

'Are you arguing the question on abstract principles?' said Sir Edward, who was nursing his foot, and looking half-amused, half-bored. His companion was too anxious to be able to judge what this look meant, and he was sadly afraid of irritating the authority in whose hands his happiness lay.

'Oh, no, not at all,' he cried, anxiously; 'I wanted to remind you, sir, that it was not the first time that such things had been done before. It's no abstract question: all that I look forward to in life depends on it. I am not badly off, as I can prove to you if you will let me. I could keep my wife, if I had the good fortune to—to—make sure of that—surrounded by everything that belongs to her sphere. There should be nothing wanting in that way. I could make settlements that would be, I think, satisfactory.'

'Is that how you talked to Ally?' said Sir Edward, a perception of the humour of the

situation breaking in. 'How astonished she must have been!'

His mind was so unusually at ease that he was ready to smile even in the midst of an important arrangement like this.

'To Ally!' cried Rochford, startled by the reference, and in his confusion unable to see how much it was in his favour. 'No, sir,' he said, eagerly, 'not a word! Do you think I would fret her delicate mind with any such suggestions? No. She is far above all that. She knows nothing about it. I may not be worthy of her, but at least I know how to appreciate her. She has heard nothing like this from me.'

'But I suppose you must think that what you did say was not without effect, and that the appreciation is not all on your side? You don't mind fretting my delicate mind, it appears,' said Sir Edward; and then, in a sharper tone, 'How far has this matter gone?'

'Sir Edward,' stammered the young man: his anxiety stupefied instead of quickening his senses, he seemed able to perceive nothing that was not against him, 'I—I——'

‘You don’t give me very much information,’ repeated the father. ‘Can’t you tell me how far this matter has gone?’

Rochford was a keen man of business. He was not to be overpowered by the most powerful judge or the most aggravating jury. He was in the habit of stating very clearly what he wanted to say. But now he stood before this tribunal stammering, without a word to say for himself.

‘Sir Edward,’ he repeated, ‘if I had taken time to think I should have felt that you ought to have been consulted first. But in an unguarded moment—my—my feelings got the better of me. I saw her unexpectedly alone. And then,’ he added, with melancholy energy, ‘I thought, I confess, that if I could be of use, if I could find and bring back——’

‘I see,’ said Sir Edward, ‘that was why you undertook so much. It was scarcely very straightforward, was it, to profess all that interest in the brother when it was the sister you were thinking of all the time?’

‘Perhaps it might not be straightforward,’

owned the unsuccessful one ; ‘and yet,’ after a pause, ‘it was no pretence. I was interested, if you will let me say so, in—all the family, Sir Edward : I should have been too glad—to be of any use ; even if there had been no—even if there had not existed—even if——’

‘I see,’ said the stern judge again : and then there was a dreadful pause.

Circumstances alter much, but not even the advanced views of the nineteenth century can alter the position in which a young lover stands before the father of the girl he loves—a functionary perhaps a little discredited by the march of modern ideas, but who nevertheless has still an enormous power in his hands, a power which the feminine heart continues to believe in, which is certainly able to cause a great deal of discomfort and inconvenience, if nothing else.

Rochford stood thoroughly cowed, with his eyes cast down, before this great arbiter of fate, although after a while, as the silence continued, there began to crop up in his mind suggestions, resolutions : how nothing should make him resign his hopes, how only Ally herself could

loose the bond between them, how he would take courage to say to the father that, however much they respected him, his decision would not be absolute, that on the contrary it could be resisted, that the two whose happiness was involved—that the two—the two—words which made his heart jump with a sudden throb in the midst of this horrible uncertainty—would stand against the world together not to be sundered. All these heroic thoughts gathered in his mind as he stood awaiting the tremendous parental decision, which came in a form so utterly unexpected, so bewildering, that he could only gasp, and for a moment could not reply. This was what Sir Edward said :—

‘ You know, I suppose, that my girls will have no money, Rochford ?’

‘ Sir !’ cried the lover, with a burst of pent-up breath which seemed to carry away with it the burden of a whole lifetime of care from his soul.

‘ They will have no money. I am a poor man, and have always been so all my life. If you have not known that before, you will have to

know it now in your capacity (as you say) of the Penton man of business. To keep up Penton will tax every resource. We shall be rather poorer, my wife thinks, than we have been at the Hook; and as for the girls——'

'Do you mean that that's all?' cried the young man. 'You don't make any—other objection? What do you think I'm made of? I don't want any money, Sir Edward. Money! when there is Miss Penton—Ally, if I may call her so. How shall I ever thank you enough? I have plenty of money; it's not money I want, it's—it's——'

Words failed him: he stood and swung Sir Edward's hand, who looked not without a glow of pleasurable feeling at this young fellow who beamed with gratitude and delight. It is never unpleasant to confer so great a favour. This had not been generally the position in which fate had placed Edward Penton. It had been usually the other way. He had received few blessings, even from the beggars, having so little to give; but an emperor could not have conferred a greater gift than his daughter, a

spotless little princess of romance, a creature altogether good and fair and sweet. He felt the water come into his eyes out of that simple sense of munificence and liberal generosity.

‘I think,’ he said, ‘you’re a good fellow, Rochford, and that you’ll be good to little Ally. She’s too young for anything of the kind, but her mother sees no objection. And she ought to know best.’

CHAPTER XIV.

THE FATE OF THE CHIFFONIER.

THE family of Penton Hook took possession of the great house of Penton in the spring. It need scarcely be said that there were endless consultations, discussions, committees of ways and means of every imaginable kind before this great removal was accomplished. Lady Penton's first visit to her new home was one which was full of solemnity. It was paid in much state, a visit of ceremony, greatly against the wish both of the visitors and the visited, before the Russell Pentons withdrew from the great house.

‘We must go to bid them good-bye,’ Sir Edward said. ‘We must not fail in any civility.’

‘Do you call that civility? She will hate the sight of us. I should myself in her place,’ Lady Penton cried.

But he had his way, as was to be expected. They drove to Penton in the new carriage, which Lady Penton could not enjoy for thinking how much it cost, behind that worthy and excellent pair of brown horses, more noted for their profound respectability and virtue than for appearance or speed, which Sir Edward had consented to buy with some mortification, but which his wife approved as a pair, without much knowledge of the points in which they were defective. He knew that Russell Penton set them down as a pair of screws at the first glance; but Lady Penton, who had never possessed a pair of horses before, was quite impervious to this, and appreciated the grandeur, though never without a pang at the cost.

But the sight of the great drawing-room overwhelmed the visitor. The first *coup d’œil* of the beautiful, vast room, with its row of pillars, its vast stretches of carpets, its costly furniture, so stupefied her, that the sight of Mrs.

Russell Penton herself in her deep mourning, and that look of injured majesty of which she could not, with all her efforts, divest herself, failed to produce the effect which otherwise it must have had. Lady Penton had fully intended to take no notice, to banish if possible from her face all appearance of curiosity or of the natural investigation which a first visit to the house which was to be her own would naturally give rise to; but she could not quite conceal the startled dismay of her first glance—a sentiment which was more agreeable to the previous mistress of the house than any other would have been. It was not very amiable, perhaps, on the part of Mrs. Russell Penton, to be pleased that her successor should thus be overwhelmed by the weight of the inheritance—but perhaps it was natural enough.

It was not possible that the conversation should be otherwise than restrained and difficult. Russell Penton, as usual, threw himself into the breach. He entered into a lively description of their plans of travel.

‘We both of us love the sunshine,’ he said;

‘England is the noblest of countries, but she is far away from the centre of warmth and light. There is no saying how far we may go southwards before we come back.’

‘But you were always fond of home, Alicia,’ said (this being, of course, as all his companions remarked, the very last thing that ought to have occurred to him to say) the new proprietor of Penton.

‘Home, I suspect,’ she said, in her formal way, ‘is more where one chooses to make it than I have hitherto thought.’ And then there was a pause.

‘The weather will be quite delightful by this time in Italy, I suppose,’ said Lady Penton, timidly. ‘I have never travelled at all; we have never had it in our power; but it seems as if it should always be fine there.’

‘It is not, though. There is no invariable good weather,’ said Russell Penton. ‘It generally turns out to be exceptional, and just as bad as what you have left, wherever you go.’

He had forgotten his little flourish of trum-

pets about the sunshine; and again they all sat silent, gazing at each other for a few terrible moments, asking each other on each side, Why did they come? and, Why did we come?

‘The river has kept in tolerable bounds this year,’ said Russell Penton, catching at a new subject, ‘no doubt because we have had less rain than usual. Come to the window, and let me show you the view.’ He led Lady Penton to the farther end of the room, where a side window commanded the whole range of the river, with the red roofs of Penton Hook making a spot of warm colour low down by the side of the stream. ‘I am glad you see it before anything is disturbed,’ he said; ‘an empty house is always a sight of dismay.’

‘Oh, I wish it were never to be disturbed at all!’ cried the poor lady; ‘I feel a dreadful impostor—a usurper—as if we were taking it from its rightful owner. It is all so suitable to her, and she to it,’ she continued, casting an alarmed, admiring look to where the mistress of the house sat, an imposing figure, all crape and

jet, like a queen about to abdicate, but not with her will.

‘Yes, for she has made it all,’ said the Prince Consort of the place; ‘but so will it be suitable to you when you have re-made it, Lady Penton; and, if it is any consolation to you to know, I shall be a much happier man out of this house. After a while I believe everything will be brighter for us both. But don’t let us talk of that. We have all had enough of the subject. Tell me what you are going to do about Mab, who has fallen so deeply in love with you all.’

‘She is a dear little girl,’ said Lady Penton. ‘I have asked her to come and pay us a long visit.’

‘That is very kind; but pray remember that it would be still kinder to her to let her be with you as she wishes. She has more money than a little girl ought to have. It will be good and kind in every way.’

Lady Penton shook her head as he went on talking. Some people are proud in one way and some in another. She did not think much

of Mab's money. She was ready to open her heart to the orphan girl, but not to profit by her. They stood in the window with the great landscape before them, and the great room behind, which was too splendid even for that chiffonier; and involuntarily Lady Penton's mind went back to that overwhelming question of the furniture, which was so much more important than little Mab and her fortune. To think of bringing anything from the Hook here! The chairs and tables would be lost, even if they were not so shabby. Nothing would bear transplanting but the children, 'And you can't furnish a house with children,' she said, ruefully, to herself.

'Your wife, no doubt, will alter everything,' said Mrs. Russell Penton, following the other pair with her eyes.

'How could you think so, Alicia? It shall be altered as little as possible. Everything that belongs to the past is as dear to me as to you.'

'I said your wife,' said Alicia. And then she added, 'No doubt she would like to go over the house.'

‘She wishes nothing, I am sure, that would vex you,’ Sir Edward said.

‘Vex! I hope I have not so little self-command. The place has become indifferent indeed to me. It was dear by association, but now that’s all ended. One ends where another begins. I can only hope, Edward, that your branch of the family will be more fortunate—more—than ours have been.’

‘Thank you, Alicia. I hope that you may be very happy, Russell and you. He’s as good a fellow as lives; and, I am sure, a delightful companion to be alone with.’

‘Are you recommending my husband to me?’ she said, with one of those smiles which made her cousin, whose utterances certainly were very inappropriate, shrink into himself. ‘Don’t you think I ought to know better than anyone what a delightful companion he is? And I hear you are to have a marriage in your family. Harry Rochford will, I hope, prove a delightful companion too.’

‘He is a good fellow,’ said poor Sir Edward, able to think of no more original phrase. ‘He is

not quite in the position a Penton might have looked for——’

‘Oh,’ she cried, hastily, ‘what does that matter?—there are Pentons and Pentons. And your daughter, Edward—your daughter——’

‘I am sorry you don’t think well of my daughter, Alicia.’

‘I never said so. She is very pretty, and what people call sweet. I know no more of her; how could I? I was going to say she looked unambitious. And against Harry Rochford there is not a word to be said. Don’t you think your wife would like to see over the house?’

This is how they parted, without any warm *rapprochement*; though Alicia, with her usual consciousness of her own faults and her husband’s opinion, involuntarily condemned every word she herself said, and everything she did, while she almost forced Lady Penton from one room to another, each of which filled that poor lady with deeper and deeper dismay. But, notwithstanding this secret current of self-disapproval, and notwithstanding the certainty she

had of what her husband felt on the subject, there was a certain stern pleasure in bidding her supplanters good-bye on the threshold of the house that was still her own; dismissing them, so to speak, for the last time from Penton with a keen sense of the despondency and discouragement with which they went away. She took notice of everything as she did them that unusual honour, which was an aggravation under the circumstances, of accompanying them to the door: of the pair of screws—of the absence of any footman—and, still more, of the depressed looks of the simple pair. All these things gave her a thrill of satisfaction. Who were they, to be the possessors of Penton? They did not even appreciate it—did not admire it—thought of the expense! But she went upstairs again with her husband following her, feeling more like a culprit, a school-boy who is expecting a lecture, than it was consistent with Alicia's dignity to feel. Russell did not say anything; but he showed inclinations to whistle, as it were, under his breath.

‘I am very glad that is over,’ she said.

‘So am I,’ he replied.

‘I know what you think, Gerald—that I ought to be more sympathetic. In what way could I be sympathetic? She is buried in calculations as to how they are to live here; and he——’

‘I respect her calculations,’ said Russell Penton. ‘It is a dreadful white elephant to come into the poor lady’s hands.’

‘And yet you scarcely concealed your pleasure when it passed away from me—to whom it has always been a home so dear.’

‘I never stand on my consistency, Alicia. I am glad and sorry about the same thing, you see. I am sorry that you are sorry to go away, yet I can’t help being glad that you are freed from the bondage of this place, which has been a kind of idol to you all; and I am glad they have it, yet sorry for poor Lady Penton and her troubled looks. When we go away from Penton, I shall feel as if we were starting for our honeymoon.’

‘Don’t say so, Gerald—when you think how it is that this has come about.’

‘It has come about by a great grief, my darling, yet a natural one—one that could not have been long averted. And I hope you don’t object, Alicia, now that you have fulfilled your duty to the last detail, that your husband should be glad to have you more his own than Penton would ever have permitted you to be.’

She accepted the kiss he gave her, not without a sense of the sweetness of being loved, but yet with a consciousness that when he spoke of her fulfilling her duty to the last detail he implied a certain satisfaction in having got rid of that duty at last. She knew as well as he did, with a faint pleasure mingling with many a thought of pain and some of irritation, that this setting out together was indeed at last their real honeymoon, in so far as that consists of a life together and alone.

Lady Penton returned very grave and overwhelmed with thought to the shelter of those red roofs at the Hook which made so picturesque a point in the landscape from Penton. She did not make any response to the children who rushed out in a body to see the parents

come home, to admire the pair of screws, and the new carriage. She went into the drawing-room and gazed long upon the chiffonier, measuring and gauging it with her eye from every side. It had, as has been said, a plate-glass back, and it was inlaid, and had various brass ornaments entitling it to the name of ormolu. She touched its corners with her hand lovingly, then shook her head.

‘Not even the chiffonier will do for Penton,’ she said; ‘not even the chiffonier!’

Nothing else could have given the family such an idea of the grandeur of the great house, and their own grandeur to whom it belonged, as well as of the saddening yet exhilarating fact that everything would have to be got new.

‘Well, my dear,’ said Sir Edward, ‘we must make up our minds to that; for to tell the truth, though you were always so pleased with that piece of furniture, I never liked it much.’

He never liked it much! Lady Penton turned a reproachful glance upon her husband; it was as if he had abandoned a friend in trouble.

‘Edward,’ she said, with a tone of despair, ‘if this will not do, nothing will do—nothing we have. I had given up the carpets and curtains, but I still had a fond hope—I thought that one side of the room, at any rate, would be furnished with *that*; but it would be nothing in the Penton drawing-room—nothing! And, if that won’t do, nothing will do.’

‘My dear,’ Sir Edward said—he planted himself very firmly on his feet, with the air of Fitzjames, in the poem, setting his back against the rock—‘my dear,’ he repeated, looking round as who should say,

‘Come one, come all, this rock shall fly
From its firm base as soon as I!’

‘I have thought of all that; and I have something to propose. You must not take me up in a hurry, but hear me out. We are all very fond of Penton Hook: but we can’t live in two houses at once.’

‘Especially when they are so close to each other,’ cried Anne, instinctively standing up by him. ‘I know what father means.’

She was the only one whose mind was dis-

engaged and free to follow every new initiative. Ally was altogether occupied by her new prospects, and Walter, though he did his best to resume his old aspect, was still too much absorbed in those that were past. Anne alone was the cheerful present, the to-day of the family, ready to take up every suggestion. She stood up by her father womanfully and put her arm through his.

‘I am with you, father—though I’m not of much account,’ she said.

Lady Penton withdrew her regretful gaze from her chiffonier. She did not, to tell the truth, expect any practical light about the furniture from her husband, who was only a theorist in such matters, or the enthusiast by his side; but she was a woman of impartial mind, and she would not refuse to listen. She turned her eyes upon the pair.

‘Well, then,’ said Sir Edward, ‘this is what I am going to propose: that I should let the Hook as it stands—poor old house, it is shabby enough, but in summer it will always bring a fair rent. Take away nothing; the chiffonier

shall stand in all its glory, and you can come back and look at it, my dear, from time to time. And look here: it is no use straining at a gnat; we must make up our minds to it. As soon as my cousin goes we must write to Gillow or somebody—who is the best man?—to go in at once to Penton and furnish it from top to bottom. It is no use straining at a gnat, as I say. We must just make a great gulp and get it down.'

'Straining at a—do you call that a gnat, Edward? It is a camel you mean.'

'Camel or not, my dear,' said Sir Edward, with a look of determination; 'that is how it must be.'

They all held their breath at this tremendous resolution.

'But as for Gillow, that is nonsense. It must be Maple at the very utmost,' Lady Penton said.

CHAPTER XV.

AN AGITATING ENCOUNTER.

IT was spring before these changes were accomplished and the family got into Penton, all newly furnished from top to bottom as Sir Edward in his magnificence had said. Perhaps this was not exactly true, for Lady Penton kept an unwearying eye upon all the movements of the workmen, and decided that it was unnecessary to touch many of the rooms where there was still enough of furniture to make them habitable, or which only the exigencies of a very large party of visitors would make necessary—and that was not a contingency likely to occur. They took up their residence in Penton when the woods were all carpeted with primroses, and everything was opening to the new life and hope of the growing season.

No doubt it was evident at once that the grandeur of the old Pentons, their cold but splendid dignity of living, and all the self-restrained yet self-conscious wealth of their manners and ways, the costliness, the luxury the state, were not to be reproduced: but then the house had become a cheerful house, which it never was under Mrs. Russell Penton's sway. It was no longer silent with one stately figure moving here and there, and Russell Penton, fretted and impatient, protesting in his morning-coat with his hands in his pockets against the splendour. There was no splendour now, but a perpetual movement, a flitting of many groups about the lawns, a sound of cheerful voices.

The children enjoyed it with their whole hearts, and Mab Russell—who had come upon that promised long visit, and had managed to establish herself with the maid and the man who were attached to her little person, and other accessories, which looked like a very long visit indeed—plunged into the midst of all their diversions, and became the ringleader in all nursery mischief.

‘I never had any growing up,’ she said. ‘I have always been out and seeing everything. I don’t like grown-up people, except you, Lady Penton. Let me go back to the nursery; and then I can be promoted to the school-room, and then burst upon the world. After Ally and Anne are both married I shall be of such use. You can’t do without a grown-up daughter. But I am only in the nursery now.’

‘Anne is not thinking of marrying, my dear. She is too young,’ Lady Penton would say, which was all the gentle protest she made against Mab’s claim. For she was very pitiful of the poor little orphan—and then Walter—— Perhaps it is not possible to be a mother without admitting certain schemes into one’s head. And Sir Edward, for his part, did not oppose, which was more curious. He was not fond of strangers. and as he, like his wife, was too proud to hear of Mab’s allowance, and her horses and she were a great expense to the restrained and economical household, it may perhaps be supposed that the father, though no schemer, had fancies in his mind too.

The one in the house whose heart beat low, whose life seemed to have sunk into the shadow, was the one of all others who should have been the brightest, and whose beginning of existence included most capabilities of enjoyment. Walter was now the heir of Penton in reality. He had attained everything he had once looked forward to. More than this, he had that little fortune of his own which in a few months would be in his actual and unfettered possession. But his life, before ever it opened out, had been chilled. It seemed to him at first that life and all its joys were over for him. It was not only that he had been disappointed in his love, but it had been associated to him with all the disgusts that affect youth so profoundly ; he had touched the mercenary, the meretricious, the degraded, and his pride had been humbled by the contact. Yet he had been ready to endure that contact, to submit to be linked with these horrors for the sake of his love.

He had known even in the midst of his rapture of youthful fantastic passion that to be linked with all these debasing circumstances

would take the fragrance and the beauty out of life. To have Mrs. Sam Crockford for his mother-in-law, to recognise that uncleanly, untidy, sordid little house as Emmy's home would have been misery even in the midst of bliss ; he had been aware of this even in the hottest of his pursuit, while he was possessed by the image of Emmy, and could think of no possibility of happiness save that of marrying her. Had it been Crockford's cottage in all its old-fashioned humility ; had it been the kind, deaf, dear old woman who had been familiar to him all his life, how different ! But the dreadful woman in that dreadful parlour, with her smile, and her portraits all smiling just the same upon the dingy walls, with her white, horrible, unwholesome hands, even in Emmy's presence how he had shuddered at her !

These images oppressed the poor boy's imagination like a nightmare—he could not forget them ; and he could not forget her who had made him accept and tolerate all that, who still could, if she would but hold up a finger, make everything possible. How was it that this

magic existed? What was the meaning of it? He knew now with more or less certainty what Emmy was. She was not, notwithstanding the cleverness of speech which had so filled him with wonder at first, either educated or refined: and she was not beautiful. He was able to perceive even that. He saw, too, and hated himself for seeing, indications of her mother's face in Emmy's, the beginning of that horrible smile. And he knew also that she had no response to make to the enthusiastic love in his own youthful breast, the passion of devotion and self-abandonment which had swept in his mind all precaution and common-sense away.

No such operations had taken place in her. She had weighed him in the balances of the most common, the most prosaic form of sense, that of worldly advantage—of money. His heart was sore with all these wounds, he felt them in every fibre. It had been taken into consideration whether he was rich enough, whether he had enough to offer. She whom he loved with extravagant youthful devotion, ready to sacrifice everything for her, even his tastes, the

manners and ways of thinking in which he had been brought up, had tried him by the vulgarest of tests. How could a young heart bear all this?

Seldom, very seldom, does so complete a disenchantment come to one so young; for Walter did not take it as young Pendennis did, or learn to laugh at his own delusion. He had no temptation to laugh; he could not put out of his pained young being the thought that it could not be true, that after all there must be some mistake in it, that his love must have judged rightly, that his disenchantment was but some horrible work of the devil.

And wounded, undeceived, quivering with pain as he was, his heart still yearned after her; he formed to himself pictures of what he might find if he stole back unawares, without any warning. He imagined her sitting in dreariness and solitude, perhaps shut up by the mother lest she should call him back, a patient martyr, knowing how she had been villified in his eyes—but not villified, oh no, only mistaken. He fed his heart with dreams of this kind even

while he knew—knew by experience, by certainty, by her own words, and looks, and sentiments, noways disguised, that the fact was not so. Women more often go on loving after the beloved has lost all illusion than men do, but perhaps in extreme youth the boy has this experience oftener than the girl. Poor Walter had been stabbed in every sensitive part, and felt his wounds all keen ; but still he could not put her out of his heart.

And the consequence of this morbid and divided soul was that his being altogether was weakened and the life made languid in it. He had no heart, as people say, for anything. He left the Hook without regret, and entered on the larger life of Penton without pleasure : everything was obscured to him as if a veil were over it. ‘No joy the blowing season gives,’ his vitality had sunk altogether. It was arranged that he was to go to Oxford in April, but he felt neither pleasure nor unwillingness. It was all unreal to him ; nothing was real but that little episode. Emmy in her brightness and lightness by his side in the streets, making those

little expeditions with him in all the confidence and closeness of belonging to him, two betrothed that were like one ; and the mother in the background with her hands, which he still seemed to feel and shudder at. He had almost daily impulses to go and see all these scenes again, to see the actors in them, to make out if they were false or true. But he did not do so, perhaps because of the languor of his being, perhaps because he was afraid of anyone divining what he wanted, perhaps because he clung to some ray of illusion still.

There began, however, to be frequent visits to town, Lady Penton being absorbed in that important matter of Ally's trousseau, which could no longer be deferred. What changes seemed to have happened in their life since the time when they all went up to London a simple party to provide what was necessary for the visit to Penton ! Penton, it had seemed at that time, would never be theirs ; they were giving it up and contemplating a comfortable obscurity with a larger income and no responsibilities. Now they had indeed the larger income, but so many

responsibilities with it, and so much to be done, that the poverty of Penton Hook seemed almost wealth in comparison; yet—for the mind accustoms itself very quickly to what is, however much it may have struggled for a different way—there was perhaps no one of the family who could now have returned to the Hook without the most humiliating sense of downfall, a feeling which Lady Penton herself shared, in spite of herself. The trousseau occupied a great many of the thoughts of the ladies at this period. They had a great many shops to go to, and when by times one of the male members of the family accompanied them, it was tedious work inspecting their proceedings and waiting, looking on, while so many stuffs were turned over and patterns compared.

It happened one of these days that Walter was of the party. How he had been got to join it nobody knew, for he shrank from London and could scarcely be induced to enter it at all, his inclinations, and yet not his inclinations so much as his dreams, and that uneasy sense that his *disillusionment* might of itself be an illusion,

drew him in one direction, while all the impulses of the moment were towards the other way. But this day he had come he could not tell why. Mab was one of the party, and, though it cannot be said that Mab's presence was an attraction, yet there was a certain *camaraderie* between the two, and she had taken it upon herself to talk to him, to attempt to amuse and interest him, when nobody knew how to approach him in his forlorn languor so unlike himself. Even Ally and Anne, his sisters, were so moved by sympathy for Wat, and by dismayed wondering what he was thinking of and what they could say, what depths of his recently acquired experience he was straying in, and what they could do to call him back from those depths—that they were silenced even by their feeling for him.

But Mab had no such restraint upon her, though she knew more than they did, having seen him at the very crisis of his fate ; and though she thought she knew a great deal more than she really knew, Mab had no such awed and trembling respect for Walter's experiences as

est movement, uttered not a word ; the shock of the discovery, the thrill of her presence so near him, were too penetrating to be betrayed by outward signs. He stood like one stupefied, though all his faculties on the moment had become so keen and clear. There was no possibility of any doubt ; her light hair, all curled on her forehead, her face so full of brightness and animation, gleamed out upon him as she turned round. Emmy here, before his eyes !

It was like watching a little drama to see her amid the more severely clothed, cloaked, and bonneted figures of the ladies round. Her head was uncovered ; she was in what seemed her natural place. Her patience seemed boundless. She took down cloak after cloak and slid them about her graceful shoulders, and made a few paces up and down to show them. It was a pretty occupation enough. She was dressed well ; her natural grace made what she was doing appear no vulgar service, but an action full of courtesy and patience. The unfortunate boy watched her with eyes which enlarged and expanded with gazing. This, then, was what

she had been doing while he had waited for her, while he had been her faithful attendant. She had never betrayed it to him. Sometimes he had believed that she was a teacher, sometimes that she went to work somewhere, he did not know how. This was what her occupation had been all the time. To make a trade out of her pretty gracefulness, her slim, youthful, easy figure, her perception of what was comely, while he was there who would have taken her out of all that, who would so fain have given her all he had. Why had she not come to him? He watched the pretty head turn, and that twist of the shoulders settling the new wrap. They were all beautiful on her. Did the women who were round her believe—could they believe that they could resemble Emmy—that anything could ever make them like her?

Walter's whole aspect changed, he stood as if on tiptoe watching that little scene. At last the bargain was decided, the purchase made; the figures changed places, went and came from one side to another, as in the theatre, then dissolved away, leaving her there before the big

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glass, in a little pose of her own, contemplating herself. It was in this glass that by-and-by Emmy, looking at herself, with her head now on one side, now on the other, suddenly perceived a stranger approaching, a gentleman, not with the air of a customer, coming along hurriedly with his face turned towards her. Emmy was sufficiently used to be admired. She knew as well as anyone that her pretty figure, as she put on the cloaks that hung about, was a pretty sight to see, that the graceful little tricks with which she arranged them on her shoulders gave piquancy to her own appearance, and a grace which perhaps did not belong to it to the article of apparel which she put on. She knew this, and so did her employers, who engaged her for this grace, and profited by her prettiness and her skill. But Emmy was very well aware that with strange gentlemen in this sanctuary of the feminine she had nothing to do. She made her preparations for retiring discreetly before the approaching man. But before she did so she gave a glance over her shoulder, a glance of invincible, inherent coquetry, just to let him see

that she perceived she was admired, and had no objection theoretically, though as a practical matter the thing was impossible.

As she gave him this look through the medium of the big mirror, Emmy recognised Walter as he had recognised her. She gave a sudden low cry of alarm, and put up her hands to her face to hide herself, then darted like a startled hare through the intricacies of all those subdivisions. Walter called out her name, and hurried after her, breathless, forgetting everything, but in a moment found himself hopelessly astray amid screens which balked his passage and groups of ladies who stared at him as if he had been a madman. Those screens, with their hanging finery, those astonished groups disturbed in their occupation, seemed to swallow up all trace of the little light figure which had disappeared in a moment. He stumbled on as far as he could till he was met by a severe and stately personage who blocked the way.

‘Is there anything I can show you, sir?’ this stately lady said, who was as imperious as if she had been a duchess.

‘I—I saw some one I knew,’ said Walter ;
‘if I might but speak to her for a moment.’

‘Do you mean one of our young ladies, sir?’
said that princess dowager. ‘The young ladies
in the mantle department are under my care ;
we shall be happy to show you anything in the
way of business, but private friends are not for
business hours ; and this is a place for ladies,
not for young gentlemen,’ the distinguished
duenna said.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE END OF ALL.

WHAT was he to do? He was stopped short, bewildered, excited, quivering with a hundred sensations by this impassible guardian of virtue and the proprieties. A young gentleman is in every personal particular stronger, more effective and potent than a middle-aged woman in a shop; yet a bolder man than Walter would have been subdued by a representative of law and order so uncompromising. He looked at her appealingly, with his young eyes full of anxiety and trouble.

‘I wanted only—a moment—to say a word,’ he faltered, as if his fate hung upon her grace.

But nothing could move her. She stood before him with her black silk skirts filling up

the passage, in all the correctness of costume and demeanour which her position required.

‘Young gentleman,’ she said, ‘remember that you may be doing a great deal of harm by insisting. You can’t speak to anyone here. If you’ll take my advice, you’ll join the ladies that seem to be looking for you. That’s your party, I believe, sir,’ she said, with a majestic wave of her hand. And then poor Walter heard Ally’s voice behind him.

‘Oh, Wat, what are you doing? We thought we had lost you: and mother is waiting. Oh, Wat, what were you doing *there*? Who were you talking to? What could you want among all the mantles?’

Another voice came to the rescue while he turned round bewildered.

‘I know what he was doing, Ally; he was looking for that wrap you were talking of. You should have asked me to come and help you to choose it, Mr. Penton.’

They swept him away bewildered, their voices and soft rustle of movement coming round him like the soft compulsion of a running stream.

The girls flowed forth in pleasant words as they got him between them, as irresistible as the duenna, though in a different way, Ally thanking him for the intention that Mab had attributed to him.

‘Oh, Wat, how good of you to think of that!’

‘But, Mr. Penton, you should have asked me to come with you to choose it; I would have protected you,’ said the laughing Mab.

He was swept away by them, confused, with something singing in his ears, with—not the earth, but at least the solid flooring, covered with noiseless carpets, laden with costly wares, giving way, as he felt, under his stumbling feet.

He accompanied them home as in a dream: fortunately their minds were engrossed with subjects of their own, so that they did not remark his silence, his preoccupation. He sat sunk in his corner of the railway-carriage, his face half covered with his hand, thinking it all over, contemplating that scene, seeing those figures float before him, and her look in the mirror

over her shoulder. Ah ! that look in the mirror was a stab to him, keener than a blow. For it was not to him that Emmy threw that glance—it was to any man, to the first pair of admiring eyes that might find out her prettiness, her grace—oh, not to him ! When she saw who it was she had covered her face and fled. She had been ashamed to be discovered. Why should she be ashamed to be discovered ? There was nothing shameful in what she was doing. In the quiet of the great shop, among women, no disturbing influences near—among the pretty things that suited her, the atmosphere warm and soft, the carpets noiseless under her feet.

Perhaps he said all this to himself to console him for some internal shock it gave him to see her there at everybody's will, turning herself into a lay figure that all the vulgar women, the dumpy matrons, the heavy girls might be deceived, and think that by assuming the same garment they might become as beautiful as she. Walter was not aware of this if it were so : but all his thoughts, which he had been trying to sever from her, went back with a bound. He

thought and thought, as the lines of the country, all touched with reviving green, flew past the carriage windows, and the jar and croak of the railway made conversation difficult, and justified his retirement into himself—seeing her now in a new light, seeing her in perspective, the light all round her, her daily work, her home, the diversions she had loved. He said to himself that it was a life of duty, though not one that the vulgar mind recognised as drawn on elevated lines. How patient she had been, smiling upon those whom she had served, putting on one thing after another, exhibiting everything at its best to please them! It was all curiously mixed up with pain and sharpness, this rapture of admiration, and confusion, and longing, and regret, which the sight of her had worked in his mind. The smile on her lips was a little like the smile with which her mother had been represented as charming the public. Emmy had her public to charm too. Oh, if he could but snatch her away from it all!—carry her off, hide her from all contact with the common world!

It occurred to him quite irrelevantly, in the midst of his thoughts, how it might be if Emmy at Penton, or in any other such place, should suddenly encounter some one whom she had served at Snell and Margrove's? This thought came into his mind like an arrow fired by an enemy across the tender and eager course of his anticipations and resolutions. How could she bear it? and how should *he* bear it, to see the stare, the whisper, the wonder, the scorn in the looks of some pair of odious, envious, spiteful women (women always call forth these adjectives under such circumstances). This arrow went to his very heart, and wounded him in the midst of his longing and purpose, and hot, impatient aspiration. And then he seemed to see her with that pretty trick of movement settling the cloak upon her shoulders, to show it off to the intending purchaser! Oh, Emmy! his Emmy! that she should be exposed to that! And yet he said to himself it was nothing derogatory—oh, nothing derogatory!—a safe, sheltered, noiseless place, among women, among beautiful stuffs and things, with no jar of the outside world about! If he could but

snatch her away from it, carry her away!

Penton contained his body but not his mind for some time after. What could he do? She had rejected him—for motives of prudence, poor Emmy! and returned to her shop. Why? why? Was he so distasteful to her as that?—that she should prefer her shop to him and his ten thousand pounds? And yet he had not felt himself to be distasteful. Even on this unexpected, undreamed-of meeting, she had hidden her face and fled, that he might not identify her, might not speak to her. Was she, then, so set against him? And yet she had not always been set against him.

Walter did not know how long the time was, which passed like a dream, while he pondered these things, asking himself every morning what he should do? whether he should return and try his fortune again; whether when she knew all she would yield to his entreaties and allow him to deliver her from that servitude?

It was on a Saturday at last that the impulse became suddenly uncontrollable. He had been thinking over her little holiday, the Saturdays, which she had to herself, the little time when

she was free, when she had gone out with him enjoying the air, even though it was winter, and the freedom, though he had not known in what bondage her days were spent. He could not contain himself when he remembered this. He went hurriedly away, not, as he had done on a previous occasion, in hot enthusiasm and rapture, but sadly, perceiving now all he was doing, and the break he must make if he were successful, between himself and his home—perceiving too the difficulties that might come after, the habits that were not as his, the modes of life which are so hard to efface. Even his anticipation of happiness was all mixed with pain. It had become to him rather a vision of the happiness of delivering her, of placing her in circumstances more fit, surrounding her with everything delightful, than of the bliss to himself which would come from her companionship. Was he a little uncertain of that after all that had come and gone? But Walter would never have owned this to himself—only it was of her happiness, not of his, that he thought; and something wrung his heart as he left Penton behind, and took his way towards the house of Mrs. Sam

Crockford with a shuddering recollection which he could not subdue.

He had planned to get there about noon, when Emmy would be coming home. She might be tired, she might be sad, she might be cheered by the sudden appearance of a faithful lover, bringing the means of amusement and variety in his hand. They might go to Richmond, and he would take her on the river, as she had said she liked it, though in winter that had not been practicable. And he had made up his mind to insist, to be masterful, as it was said women liked a man to be. He would not accept a denial, he thought. He would tell her that he could not endure it, that this work of hers must come to an end. He made up his mind that neither her sauciness nor her sweetness should distract him from his resolution, that this thing must come to an end. He walked most of the long way from the railway-station to the little street in which was the mean little house where she lived with her mother. How often he had trodden that way with his heart beating—how often distracted with pain! There was more pain than pleasure in his bosom now.

He did not know how she would receive him, but he had made up his mind not to be discouraged by any reception she might give him. This time he would have his way. His motive was no longer selfish, he said to himself. It was no longer for him, but for her.

There was a little commotion in the street, of which he took no particular notice as he came up. A carriage with a pair of grey horses was coming along with the familiar jog of a hack carriage which is paid for at so much an hour. Walter did not suppose this could have anything to say to him, and took no notice, as how should he? But when he approached the house it became more and more evident that something had happened or was happening. A group of idlers were standing about a door, from which came the sound of voices and laughter, altogether festive sounds. Somebody was rejoicing, it was apparent, with that not too refined kind of joy—a happiness unrestrained by any particular regard for the proprieties that belong to such regions. Even this did not rouse Walter. What did it matter to him if

some one had been married, or christened, or was going through any of the joyful incidents of life—next door? His mind was full of what she would say, of what she would do, of the steps to be taken in order to complete her deliverance. It would not be his deliverance. It would be his severance from much that had acquired a new value in his eyes. But it would be freedom to her; it would be, whatever she might say, comparative wealth. Why had she so resisted? why, in her position, had she scorned his little fortune? It could only be, he thought, that he might be hindered from sacrificing so much on his side.

He was deep, deep in thought as he approached. Surely it was next door, this marriage, or whatever it was. It must be next door. The carriage came leisurely up and stopped, the coachman displaying a great wedding favour. It *was* a marriage, then: strange that he should come with his mind full of that proposal of his, to which he would take no denial, and find a marriage going on next door! He smiled to himself at the odd circumstance, but there was not very

much pleasure in his smile. There would soon be another there—but quiet—that at least he would secure—not attended by this noisy revelry, the voices and cheers ringing out into the street. Ah, no ! but quiet, the marriage of two people who would have a great deal to think of, to whom happiness would come seriously, not without sacrifices, not without——

But, oh, that sudden shock and pause ! what did this mean ? It was not at the next house, but at Mrs. Sam Crockford's door that the carriage with the two grey horses drew up. It was there the idlers were standing grouped round to see somebody pass out : the voices came from within that well-known narrow entrance. Walter stopped, struck dumb, his very breath going, and stood with the rest, to see—what he might see. He heard the stir of chairs pushed from the table, the chorus of good-byes, and then——

The open doorway was suddenly filled by the bridal pair, the bridegroom coming out first, she a step behind. Walter knew the man well enough ; he had seen him but once, but that seeing had been sufficient. He came out

flushed in his wedding clothes, his hat upon one side of his head, his white gloves in his hand.

‘Thank you all ; we’ll be jolly enough, you needn’t fear,’ he was calling to the well-wishers behind.

After him Emmy came forward, perhaps more gaily apparelled than a bride of higher position would have been for her wedding journey, her hat covered with flowers and feathers, her dress elaborately trimmed. She too was a little flushed, and full of smiles and satisfaction. Walter did not stir, he stood and looked on grimly, like a man who had nothing to do with it. It did not seem to affect him at all ; his heart, which had been beating loudly, had calmed in a moment. He stood and looked at them as if they were people whom he had never seen before—standing silent in the midst of the loungers of the little street, a few children and women, a passing errand-boy, and a man out of work, who stood too with his hands in his pockets and gazed in a sullen way, with a sort of envy of the people who were well-off and well-to-do. The bridegroom had not the

same outward deference to his bride which might be seen in other circles. He held her arm loosely in his and dragged her behind him, turning back and shouting farewells to his friends.

‘Oh, we’ll be joyful enough!’ he cried, taking no heed to her timid steps.

And perhaps Emmy’s steps could not be described as timid. She gave his arm a shake to rouse him from the fervour of these good-byes.

‘Here, mind what are you doing, Ned, and let’s get on, or we shall miss the train,’ she said.

Walter stood and gazed stupidly, and took all the little drama in,

And then there ensued the farce at the end, the shower of rice, the old shoes thrown at the departing pair. The jovial bridegroom threw back several that fell into the carriage, and Emmy laughed and cheered him on. They went off in a burst of laughter and gaiety. Her quick eye had glanced at the spectators on either side of the door. Could she have seen him there? She had turned round to her mother, who followed them to the door, and whispered something as they went away: but that was all. Walter stood and watched them drive off; it was all like a scene

in a theatre to him. He did not seem able to make up his mind to go away. And then suddenly he felt a touch upon his arm.

‘Oh, Mr. Penton, is it you? Step in—step in, sir, please, and let me speak to you; I must say a word to you.’

‘I can see no need for any words,’ he said, dully; but partly to get free of her, for her touch was intolerable to him, partly because of the want of any impulse in his own mind, he followed her into the house, into the parlour, all full of wedding favours and finery. The bridal-party had retired riotously, as was very apparent, to the table in the back room.

‘Oh, Mr. Penton, you have been shamefully treated!’ Mrs. Sam Crockford cried. She was herself splendid in a new dress, with articles of jewellery hung all over her. She touched her eyes lightly with her handkerchief as she spoke. ‘Young gentleman,’ she said, ‘though I have had to give in to it, don’t think I approved of it. My chyild, of course, was my first object, but I had some heart for you too. And you behaved so beautiful! How could she ever do it, and prefer him to you, is more than I can tell!’

‘Then it was going on all the time?’ said Walter, dully.

He did not seem to have any feeling on the subject, or to care; yet he listened with a sort of interest as to the argument of the play.

‘Sir,’ said the woman, ‘everything is said to be fair in love. If it will be any consolation to you, you have helped my chyild to an alliance which—is not greater than her deserts—no, it is not greater than her deserts, Mr. Penton, as you and I know: but so far as money goes was little to be looked for. Edward is not perhaps a young man of manners as refined as we could wish, but he can give her every advantage. He is in business, Mr. Penton. Business has its requirements, which are different to those of art. His mother has just died, who was not Emmy’s friend. And he is rich. The business,’ said Mrs. Sam Crockford, sinking her voice, ‘brings in—I can’t tell how many thousands a year.’

Then Walter remembered what Emmy had said about some one who had as much a year as his whole little fortune consisted of, and added that dully to the story of the drama which he

was hearing, paying a sort of courteous attention without any interest to speak of.

‘Why did not she—do this at once? that is what surprises me,’ he said.

‘Mr. Penton, I said all things are fair in love. I am afraid she played you against him to draw him on. She is my only child, it is hard for me to blame her. I don’t know that strictly speaking she is to be blamed. A girl has so few opportunities. He proposed a secret marriage, but my Emmy has too much pride for that. You were always with her, Mr. Penton, after she returned, and he was distracted. He thought she was going to marry you. I thought so myself at first: but she played her cards very well. She played you against him to draw him on.’

‘Oh, she played me against him to draw him on,’ said Walter.

These words kept going through his head while Emmy’s mother went on talking at great length, explaining, defending, blaming her ‘chylid.’ She might as well have said nothing more, for he could not take it in. The words seemed to circle round and round him in the air.

They did not wound him, but gave a sort of wonder—a dull surprise.

‘She played me against him to draw him on.’

He went back through the endless streets to the railway-station, walking the whole way, feeling as if that long, long course might go on for ever, for nights and days, for dreary centuries; and then the railway, with its whirl of noise and motion, completed and confirmed the sense of an endless going on. He could not have told how long he had been away when he walked up the avenue again in the soft darkness of the spring night. His dulled mind mixed this absence up somehow with the previous one, and, with this confusion, brought a curious sense of guilt, and impulse to ask pardon. He would arise and go to his father, and say, ‘Father, I have sinned.’ He would kneel down by his mother’s side. He could not understand that he had done no harm—that he had only left Penton that day.

‘She played me against him to draw him on.’

It all seemed so simple—nobody’s fault—not even perhaps Emmy’s—for girls have so few opportunities, as her mother said. Perhaps it

was natural, as it was the explanation of all the play—the *mot de l'enigme*. It seemed a sort of satisfaction to have such an ample explanation of it, at the last.

Just inside the gate he saw something white fluttering among the trees, and Mab cried, breathless, 'Mr. Walter, is it you?'

It was all he could do not to answer her with that explanation which somehow seemed so universally applicable, 'She played me off'—but he restrained himself, and only said,

'Yes, it is I.'

She put out her hand to him in an impulsive, eager way. He had not in fact seen her that day before, and Walter took the hand thrust into his in the dark with a curious sensation of help and succour; it was a cool little soft fresh hand, not like that large and clammy member which, thank heaven, he had nothing to do with any more. And there was an end of it all—there it all ended, in Mab's little frank hand meeting his in the twilight as if she were admitting him to a new world.

Ally was married shortly after, and the mar-

riage was very good for the material interests of the house of Penton. It was a very fine marriage for young Mr. Rochford of Reading, but it was also a fine thing for the family in whose history he had in future more interest than merely that of their man of business.

Mab still promises every day that Anne will soon follow her sister's example, and that she herself will be the only one left to fulfil the duties of the grown-up daughter. Her visit has been prolonged again and again, till it has run out into the longest visit that ever was known. Will it ever come to an end? Will she ever go away again, and set up with a chaperone in the house in Mayfair with which she is sometimes threatened by her guardians? Who can tell? There will be many people to be consulted before it can be decided one way or other. But, if nobody else's mind is made up, Mab's is very distinct upon this point, as well as upon most others within her range. And she is one of those people who usually have their way.

THE END.

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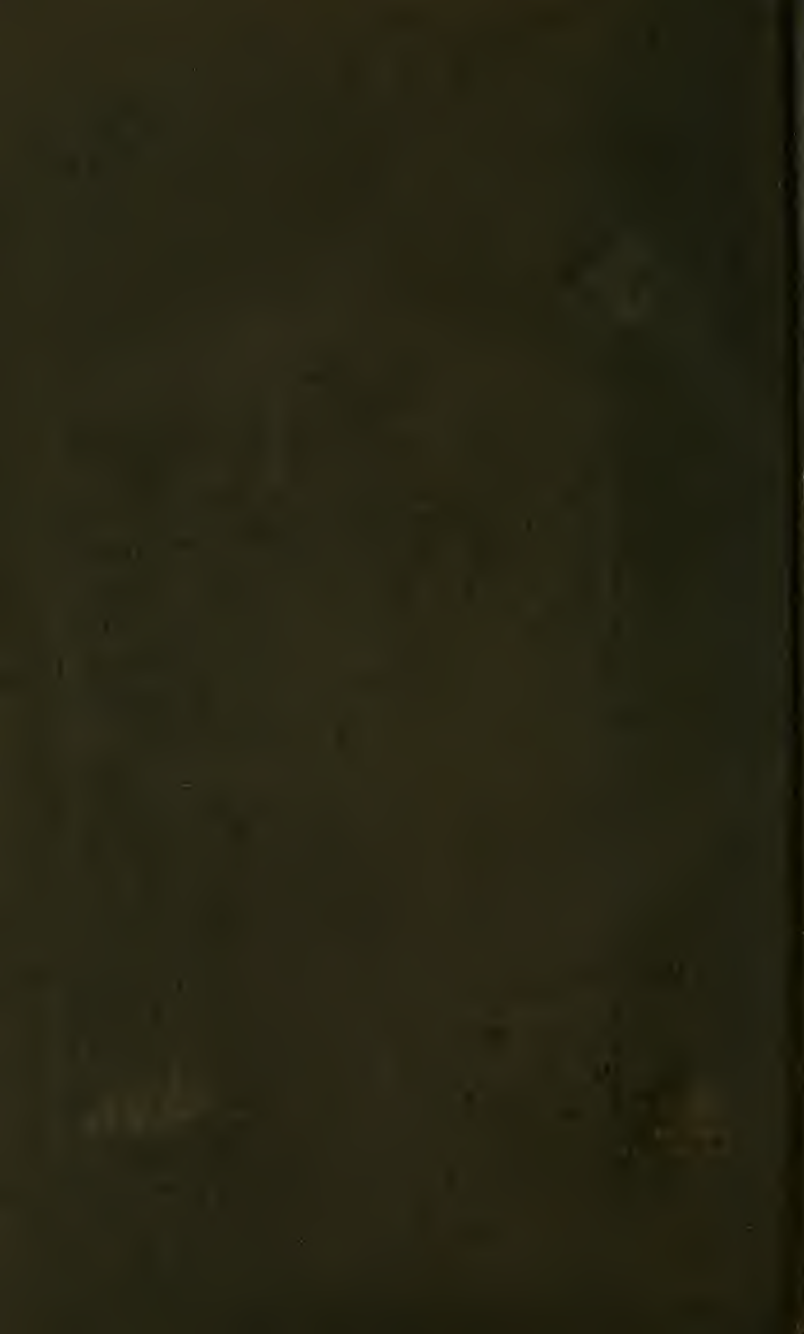
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